Solo Leveling

II

Chugong

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Solo Leveling

II

CHUGONG

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Solo Leveling II

CHUGONG

Translation by Hye Young Im and J. Torres

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SOLO LEVELING Volume 2

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1

THE POTENTIAL JACKPOT

1

THE POTENTIAL JACKPOT

Jinho's squad had a total of two dungeons scheduled on this day, and there was quite a distance between them.

Sangmin and Kichul kept in frequent contact as each waited at a dungeon for the squad to arrive in order to confirm with their own eyes if their hunch was correct.

…It's still pretty chilly.

Sangmin bought a cup of coffee from a nearby vending machine. He'd been waiting for Jinho's team for an hour now, but his anticipation was somehow beating out his boredom.

It'd been a while since his heart had raced this fast.

If I'm right, he's the first super-rookie to come along in ages—and an S rank to boot!

Sangmin had secured the title of department manager at a young age, and it was all thanks to his intuition. In fact, he had played a large role in raising White Tiger to its current status as a prominent guild.

That same intuition was now telling him that Jinwoo Sung might be able to take the White Tiger Guild to the next level.

People will think I've gone insane if I say that, though…

After all, according to his records, Jinwoo was still officially an E-rank hunter.

Things weren't always what they appeared to be, though, and Sangmin wouldn't have been who he was today if that wasn't true.

He was watching the gate with the eyes of a hawk when…

Riiing, riiing!

It was a call from Kichul.

"Hey, Kichul."

"Sir, Jinho Yoo's squad just arrived."

"Okay. Stay calm and keep an eye on them, then report back their every move."

"Yes, sir. Wait. Huh? M-Manager An!"

The voice on the other end of the line sounded odd.

Did that idiot get caught?

Sangmin started feeling anxious.

"What's wrong? Talk to me."

"You were right, sir!"

"What?"

His heart beat faster.

"Only two people, Jinho and Jinwoo, are entering the gate."

"Of course, since this is all a test for Jinwoo."

As expected, Sangmin's hunch was spot-on. His intuition had never failed him when it came to situations like this.

Nice!

He pumped his fist.

While you guys take your sweet time, the White Tiger Guild can make a move. Jinwoo Sung will be ours.

Because that's how Sangmin An and the second administration team rolled.

While Sangmin was distracted by his daydreams of victory, Kichul's voice continued spilling through the phone.

"So what should I do now, sir? Should I join you?"

"No, keep monitoring them."

"Pardon? But we've already confirmed your suspicions."

"I'm curious about their clear time. I'd like to know how many hours it'll take them to clear a C-rank dungeon."

"Even A-rank hunters need more than a couple of hours if they go in by themselves, don't they?"

"Do you have something better to do?"

"Of course not, sir. I just thought you might get bored by yourself, so I thought I'd ask."

That was why Sangmin liked Kichul—he had a lightning-quick ability to adapt to situations.

"Don't worry about me and keep your eyes peeled for when they leave the dungeon."

"Understood."

"I'll have my phone with me at all times, so call me right away if something happens."

"Yes, sir."

After Sangmin finished relaying his orders and hung up, he suddenly realized just how hungry he was.

Rrrumble…

Guess I was too focused on work……

He'd been so preoccupied with waiting for Jinwoo that he hadn't eaten all day, and it was already past lunchtime. He hadn't been able to leave his position because he'd had no idea when Jinho's squad would arrive. Now that he could relax, he looked around for a place to eat before heading into a convenience store.

It's not like I'm trying to save money, but……

Even though there wasn't anyone around to judge him, he felt uncomfortable dining in a restaurant alone. After some deliberation, he decided on instant ramen from the store. He poured hot water into the ramen container and waited three minutes for everything to cook. He'd just snapped his wooden chopsticks apart when…

Riiing!

"Oh, for… Who the hell's calling me when I'm trying to eat?"

A familiar name lit up his phone screen.

Second-in-command

Damn you, Kichul……

Sangmin took the call and snapped, "You couldn't wait to call me again?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but—"

"But what? If you called me for nothing, you're eating instant ramen for lunch for a week!"

"Sir, they've exited the gate!"

Sangmin, who at that moment had raised some noodles to his mouth, froze like a video on pause.

"What?"

“Jinho and Jinwoo exited the dungeon, and the squad is now getting ready to leave!”

He hadn’t misheard anything. He rushed to check the time.

“It’s only been thirty minutes! Did they give up on the raid?”

“No, the gate is closing.”

None of this made any sense! Despite the different levels of difficulty among C-rank dungeons, it wasn’t possible for a single person to clear a dungeon in thirty minutes.

“Check again! Are you sure the gate is closing?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Would you like me to send you a video?”

“…No, that’s fine.”

Sangmin hung up the phone and stared blankly ahead.

What would take an A-rank hunter two hours to clear, Jinwoo had finished in thirty minutes? Never mind B rank. Based on empirical data, he had to be…

“Higher than an A rank……”

Sangmin had hit the proverbial jackpot.

* * *

“Boss, do you have somewhere else to be?”

“No, why?”

“I’ve never seen you hunt so fast.”

Jinho was absolutely awestruck. He’d already known Jinwoo was strong, but the phenom hunter had been on a completely different level today. What Jinho didn’t know was that the results had been inevitable.

Jinwoo suppressed a laugh.

It's because the magic beasts this time were werewolves.

[TITLE: WOLF ASSASSIN]
A title given to those skilled at hunting wolves. When battling an animal-type monster, all abilities will increase by 40 percent.

With the enemies being werewolves, the Wolf Assassin buff had naturally kicked in. His high level plus the buff meant that mere C-rank magic beasts hadn't stood a chance.

Yeek!

Whimper!

Whiiiine!

At the rate Jinwoo had torn through them, even ten extra hands wouldn't have been enough to help Jinho collect the essence stones from the beasts' remains. Jinho ended up drinking five bottles of healing potion in this dungeon alone. The concoctions were so filling that he groaned multiple times about how he wouldn't need to eat lunch.

That's that, but……

Jinwoo looked up. He'd felt like someone was watching him for a while now.

I don't think it's a hunter, since I can't sense mana.

His eyes swept the surrounding area, but nothing caught his attention. If he wanted to, he could track down the interloper, but it would take a while due to the lack of animosity or hostility.

……

It could have been nothing, and sure enough, the presence soon vanished.

“What’s wrong, boss?”

“…Nothing. Let’s head out.”

The clock was ticking, and there was no time to waste. Jinwoo took one last quick look around and then got in the front passenger seat.

Jinwoo didn’t feel the gaze when entering or exiting the second dungeon.

Am I being paranoid?

Either way, he was glad it wasn’t a big deal. While he was lost in his thoughts, Jinho approached and hung his head.

“I’m sorry, boss. The other gates are too far, so this is the last one for today.”

“That’s fine—nothing to be sorry about.”

There was still plenty of time before sunset, but they’d been on such a roll closing down the gates in this particular area that they had to call it quits for the day.

“Good work, everyone.”

“You did all the work, chief.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Good work!”

Jinwoo and Jinho got in the van after seeing off the other members.

“I’ll take you home, boss.”

Jinho had become his trusty chauffeur at some point. He looked completely at home behind the wheel, like this was what he was meant to do. Jinwoo gazed at him with pity.

He has to play chauffeur even though he’s a little rich boy, just because he wants to try his hand at being a guild master……

Jinho caught Jinwoo staring at him as he accelerated and chirped with a bright smile, “Huh? Is there something on my face, boss?”

“…Nope.”

Jinwoo quickly turned his eyes ahead, as if he hadn’t been caught. Something occurred to him, and he pulled out his phone to check the time.

It’s 4:46.

He had a while before he needed to be home, and luckily, he had something else to do.

It was around here, wasn’t it?

If memory served…

Jinwoo turned to his driver. “Hey, Jinho?”

“Yes, boss?” Jinho replied as he skillfully turned the wheel and smoothly maneuvered the van around a corner.

“Let’s go to the Mirae Department Store.”

“Mirae Department Store?” Jinho was puzzled by the odd request.

“Yeah.”

“Sure, it’s right over there, but…is something wrong, boss? You’ve been acting odd all day.”

“…You know, you’ve gotten pretty chatty recently.”

At those words, Jinho whipped his head to the front and sat ramrod straight.

“I’ll get you there at the speed of light, boss. Hold on to your seat.”

With his shift in attitude, Jinho drove straight to the destination without braking once, and the pair soon arrived.

Skreeeech.

The vehicle came to a stop in front of the grand Mirae Department Store, which was located in downtown Seoul.

Tmp.

As Jinwoo got out of the van, Jinho also disembarked and walked over to the hunter, who stood there quietly.

“Our guild has to have offices in a building like this, right, boss?” he asked half-jokingly, gazing up at the structure. Alas, he received no answer.

Feeling something was off, Jinho urgently looked to his side. “Huh?”

Jinwoo was already gone.

“Boss?”

Search as he might, he couldn’t find a trace of Jinwoo in the area.

“Boooss?”

* * *

[As the boss has been defeated, the dungeon will now revert to its original state.]

Leveled up twice in the department-store instance dungeon.

Jinwoo’s footsteps were light on his way home. That particular instance-dungeon key had come from a mystery box a while back and could be used only at the Mirae Department Store. He had been waiting for a good opportunity to go and had ended up clearing it today while he had some free time.

“Boooss?”

Jinho’s bewildered face while looking for him was hilarious no matter how many times Jinwoo pictured it.

At that moment, his phone rang.

Riiing!

He checked the caller ID, but it wasn't a number he recognized.

Who…?

When he was in high school, all his free time had been devoted to raising his baby sister, filling their sickly mother's shoes, and he'd started working as a hunter right after graduation. Meaning, his network of acquaintances was rather limited.

I don't usually get calls from unknown numbers…

His hesitation was momentary, however, and he decided to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Is this Jinwoo Sung?"

The man on the other end of the line had a clear voice. Jinwoo hung up as soon as he heard it.

Click.

Based on past experience, 99 percent of the time, this kind of call is either a telemarketer or a loan shark.

As he went to pocket his phone, it rang again.

Riiing!

It was the same number.

Huh? So it's not a telemarketer?

Telemarketers had quotas to fill, so they rarely called back someone who hung up on them, as it was better to call as many numbers as possible. Besides, they also knew it'd be a waste of time to try again.

That means this person actually needs to talk to me…

Jinwoo answered the phone properly this time.

“Yes, this is Jinwoo Sung.”

“Oh, excellent. I thought I dialed the wrong number, since the call cut off. Ha-ha.”

“……”

Jinwoo debated for two seconds if he should apologize and explain that he’d assumed the man was a telemarketer or a loan shark, but he stopped.

Admitting that would be even ruder.

After a brief silence, the salesman—no, the man with a salesman’s voice—continued.

“Oh, right, I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Sangmin An with the White Tiger Guild.”

Jinwoo stopped in his tracks.

The White Tiger Guild is calling me?

He racked his brain but couldn’t think of a reason why they might reach out to him. The only connection he could remember was when they’d helped the association with the double-dungeon incident, but……

It’s a bit late to be asking me about that.

Jinwoo wasn’t the type of person who could restrain his curiosity, so before Sangmin could say anything, Jinwoo beat him to the punch.

“May I ask why the White Tiger Guild is calling me?”

“It’s a little difficult to talk about this over the phone, so could we meet in person?”

Instead of ordering him around, this man was willing to accommodate him, so Jinwoo couldn’t think of a valid reason to refuse. It also so happened that he would be available the day after tomorrow.

Didn't Jinho say he had to attend some kind of family thing?

Jinho had apologized for breaking their streak of daily raids, as his entire family was required to attend an important event.

An important event…

Maybe Jinwoo watched too much TV, because he imagined it to be some rich-family gathering in a fancy hotel banquet hall.

In any case, it meant he was free that day.

"I have time on Thursday."

"I was wondering… Are you free right now?"

"Right now…?" Jinwoo checked the time. His phone read eight PM.

"It's almost eight o'clock…"

"I'm close by. I just need a moment of your time."

"Close by?"

"I'm in a café nearby."

Sangmin told him the name of the café…which sounded very familiar. Not only did he often pass it by because it was across the street from his apartment building, but it was also where Jinho had first made his proposal.

Jinwoo's eyes narrowed.

They know my address.

Hunters' addresses weren't readily available on the association website. The only details made public were their names and ranks. Hunters could choose to add their personal information, but Jinwoo hadn't included a single way to contact him in his profile.

Despite this, not only did they know his number, but they were also waiting near his home. That meant they had done their research.

Now that I think about it……

Things were starting to add up.

“Today I kept feeling like someone was watching me, so I’m assuming that was also one of your people?” Jinwoo’s voice deepened.

At his accusation, the man readily offered a polite apology.

“Sorry if we made you uncomfortable. We simply wished to verify the truth. We wouldn’t have bothered contacting you if we wanted to cause trouble. I guarantee you’ll appreciate what I have to say.”

Jinwoo considered a bit before answering. “…I’ll be there soon.”

* * *

“Hunters, Reapers, Knights, Fame, and us, White Tiger. I’m sure you’ve at least heard of them.” Sangmin listed off the top five guilds in South Korea.

Among them, the Hunters Guild was number one, but it hadn’t always been the top guild. Originally, that title had belonged to the Reapers Guild, but when the White Tiger Guild broke off from the Reapers, they’d lost their standing. After that, the student had surpassed the teacher. The fact that White Tiger had not only gained independence but also surpassed the Reapers was old news these days.

And now, the White Tiger Guild was gunning for the number one spot that had once been held by the Reapers. Sangmin was fully convinced that Jinwoo Sung, the man sitting across from him, would be a great help in their quest to reclaim their former glory.

Sangmin handed Jinwoo his business card.

Sangmin An, White Tiger Guild Second Administration Team Manager

“I’m Sangmin An, the manager of the second administration team under the White Tiger Guild, one of the top five guilds in the nation. I’m in charge of recruiting and managing new hunters.”

Any other hunter would have given him a proper ninety-degree bow and struck up a conversation even before receiving his business card. Unless they were an S or A rank, joining the White Tiger Guild was every hunter’s dream.

Truthfully, Sangmin expected the same reaction from Jinwoo, but he was different from all the others. He didn’t miss a beat and calmly asked, “Why is someone from the White Tiger Guild looking me up?”

Sangmin was shocked.

To think he wasn’t intimidated even after hearing the name White Tiger…

They’d exchanged only a few words so far, but Sangmin had a feeling that recruiting Jinwoo wouldn’t be easy. On the other hand, he still very much wanted to secure this up-and-coming hunter. After all, there was nothing wrong with an ambitious new talent.

If you think about it, he has to have at least some ambition to be of any use.

Sangmin strengthened his resolve.

“I’ll be straight with you. We would like to recruit you, Hunter Sung. We are prepared to double whatever Yoojin Construction has promised you.”

He offered Jinwoo a pleasant smile. It looked like Yoojin Construction was still testing out Jinwoo’s capabilities.

How stupid.

The speed with which he could clear a C-rank dungeon, the marketing potential of a reawakened hunter, the ease with which he

was handling himself in this situation, and so on—there was no reason to test him any longer.

Since they don't know how valuable he is, they probably haven't offered him the right price.

Sangmin was confident White Tiger could double whatever Yoojin Construction had put on the table—or more.

But Jinwoo's gaze turned icy.

"How did you know?"

"Wh-what?"

Jinwoo's unexpected response caused Sangmin to falter, even with all his experience as a seasoned recruiter.

"How did you know to find me?"

It occurred to Sangmin that if words had a weight, these would've crushed him.

What is this overwhelming pressure?

The man in front of him seemed to regard him as an enemy. After all, Sangmin had both tailed him and contacted him out of the blue for a meeting. It was understandable that Jinwoo might consider him hostile.

Sangmin rushed to explain. "Oh, uh, we didn't spy on you on purpose. We happened to receive word that someone was rapidly clearing C-rank dungeons in our area, and your name came up when we looked into the matter."

"……"

Jinwoo reined in his glare.

I see…

Contrary to what Jinwoo feared, it didn't seem like this man had investigated him because he'd discovered Jinwoo's secret. Jinwoo had appeared on his radar because of the speed with which he'd been clearing dungeons.

It doesn't look like he's malicious.

Jinwoo's expression relaxed slightly, and the tension between the two dissipated a bit.

Whew.

Sangmin was relieved, but the conversation hadn't made any progress. He needed to find a way to make a favorable impression.

Nothing better than sharing information for getting on someone's good side.

Sangmin was a master of recruitment! He gathered himself and reassumed his professional smile.

"It's supposed to be confidential information, but we're already aware that Chairman Myunghan Yoo is looking to form a new guild."

"……" Jinwoo neither confirmed nor denied this.

Sangmin continued. "I knew as soon as I saw you together with his youngest son, Jinho. We figured they were trying to recruit you, a reawakened hunter, for their guild."

As Jinwoo suspected, Sangmin thought he was a reawakened hunter.

Nice to know that that's what they think…

It meant that Jinwoo didn't have to make up a story.

Sangmin quickly added, "We were hoping to talk to you before you signed a contract with Yoojin, so we contacted you like this in a rush. I apologize again if we overstepped any boundaries."

“It’s okay.” It would have been a different story if there were any ill intentions, but given the sincerity of the apology, Jinwoo decided there was no need to make a big fuss.

More importantly……

He needed to figure out how to handle this.

Sangmin interrupted his train of thought. “Have you already signed a contract with Yoojin Construction?”

Jinwoo’s hesitation seemed to have given him that impression. When Jinwoo shook his head, Sangmin’s slightly anxious expression immediately brightened.

Great! He’s a free agent, then?

Here was an opportunity to recruit a highly skilled hunter who could clear a C-rank dungeon all by himself in thirty minutes. Technically, he had gone in with another D ranker, but to someone B rank or higher, he was probably more like deadweight.

What if Jinwoo joins the White Tiger Guild and gets reevaluated as an A rank or better?

Sangmin was having a hard time suppressing his giddiness.

Jinwoo scratched his chin.

Seems like he’s counting his chickens before they’ve hatched……

Thinking about it, White Tiger wasn’t so bad. It was one of the top five guilds and had potential to become number one. But Jinwoo had no intention of joining a guild now.

My net worth will increase as my level goes up.

Plus, it might be a while until he could do this—or maybe never, but…

What if, one day, I can clear B- and A-rank dungeons by myself the way I clear C-rank dungeons now?

The earnings from high-rank dungeons were beyond imagination. They were the reason large guilds were able to grow into entities rivaling megacorporations. Highly valuable essence stones, remnants of magic beasts, minerals excavated from dungeons, rune stones, artifacts… Untold sums of money flowed from those dungeons.

If he could obtain and keep all that wealth for himself, why share it with a guild?

If I keep leveling up, it's definitely not impossible.

That was why joining up seemed a bit premature.

The corners of Jinwoo's mouth started to lift.

Sangmin beamed, thinking this was a positive response. "Have you come to a decision?"

"You promised me double, yes?"

"That's right. If you believe what they offered doesn't reflect your talents, we could possibly raise your compensation."

"Then how much is the White Tiger Guild's building worth?"

Sangmin's expression froze for a second.

Is he doubting our financial liquidity?

No, this wasn't the time to be indignant. Here was a chance to flex for the guild. There was no need to withhold the information and not tell him. This was an opportunity.

Sangmin proudly answered, "The appraised value is about fifty billion won. White Tiger doesn't use the entire building, but the guild does own it."

Initially, White Tiger had been renting out office space, but they eventually bought the property after establishing themselves. It took only a year to do so. It was a prime example of how much money a large guild made. Had Jinwoo asked, Sangmin was ready to tell him

the guild's gross and net profits, but Jinwoo's casual response rendered him speechless.

"Can you give me the building?"

"Excuse me?" Sangmin's eyes widened. Positive that he'd misheard, Sangmin asked, "Wh-what did you say?"

Jinwoo patiently explained. "Yoojin has promised me a thirty-billion-won building, you see. If White Tiger's building is only fifty billion won, that's less than double, but considering the substantial value, I'd be willing to overlook it."

"D-did you say thirty billion won?" Sangmin's mouth was agape.

Jinwoo had four years of experience, but that career was as an E-rank hunter. He'd become noteworthy only in recent weeks. That meant it was likely that his second awakening hadn't been much earlier. How powerful was he now for Chairman Yoo, a man well-known for his business acumen, to promise him thirty billion won even before his reevaluation?

Wait, is he bluffing because there's no way I can verify this offer?

Sangmin gazed at Jinwoo suspiciously. As he did, Jinwoo took out his phone and quickly dialed someone as if having read Sangmin's mind.

Riiing!

Click.

"Yes, boss?"

It was late, and the café was quiet, but Jinwoo purposefully turned the volume on his phone all the way up.

"Let me ask you something, Jinho."

"Of course! Ask me anything, boss."

Jinho? Jinho Yoo?

Sangmin swallowed nervously.

Is he going to tell Jinho about our discussion?

His assumptions were misguided, though, and Jinwoo brought up something unexpected.

“The building you said you would give me, what’s it worth again?”

“Its market value is about thirty billion won, but it’ll jump once construction is completed and our guild moves in, boss. Oh, right! If you need a notarized document, I can fax it to you now.”

“Hold on.”

Jinwoo covered the receiver with his hand so Jinho couldn’t hear and asked Sangmin, “If you’re having a hard time believing this, would you like to talk to him yourself?”

Sweating profusely, Sangmin shook his head.

“No, that’s okay. I gotta go.”

“You got it, boss.”

Sangmin’s eyes were wild, a complete reversal from before the phone call.

Yoojin Construction promised him thirty billion won as a signing bonus even before forming the guild? And the son addresses him with absolute respect?

Sangmin was stunned. “Th-the thing is… Negotiating large sums of money like that is above my pay grade, so to speak… But if you give me some time, I can discuss this with upper manage—”

Jinwoo cut him off. “Then I believe we’re done here.”

Sangmin’s head drooped, and he was at a loss for words. He analyzed the source of his failure.

Ultimately, I lacked information.

He had been unsuccessful because he had rushed things. He'd made rash, risky moves because he couldn't contain his excitement at such a huge catch. If only he had done more research on Yoojin Construction's proposal and proceeded as usual with support from the guild……

I need to first report this to the guild master.

If Chairman Yoo valued Jinwoo at 30 billion won, then he could well be worth 50 billion or maybe even 100 billion. It might not be too late…

With the guild's help, I should be able to dig up more information about him and push harder—

Jinwoo interrupted his thoughts. "Let me just ask you one thing."

Sangmin raised his head and realized that Jinwoo's cordial demeanor had vanished. Despite the fact that it was a warm spring night, the air around them suddenly turned chilly.

Gulp.

As Sangmin swallowed nervously, Jinwoo lowered his voice. "How many people know about me?"

"Oh… Only me for now. I was rushing to try and recruit you as soon as possible, so I didn't have time to report to upper management."

In truth, there was one other person who was aware: Kichul, Sangmin's subordinate and right-hand man. Sangmin figured that this might upset Jinwoo, so decided to keep Kichul a secret, just in case.

But Jinwoo growled, "Let's not lie to each other out of mutual respect, agreed?"

Sangmin was taken aback.

What…? Did he look into us before our meeting?

If that was the case, lying would just make their relationship unnecessarily worse than it already was. Sangmin didn't even want to consider that possibility.

I guess I have no choice but to tell him the truth.

The relationship between a hunter and a guild was similar to that of a celebrity and an agent. Even if a hunter wasn't willing to enter into a contract at this point in time, it was important to maintain a good relationship, because one never knew what the future may hold.

Avoid conflict with hunters as much as possible. That was the golden rule of the second administration team.

To that end, Sangmin decided to confess. "To be perfectly honest, one of my subordinates does know about you. That is the truth."

Jinwoo nodded.

I knew it……

It was just as he'd suspected. Research, surveillance, and reaching out to Jinwoo… This was too much work for one person. The decisive clue was the timing of when Sangmin had contacted him. His call had come as soon as Jinwoo entered the vicinity of his house.

Someone was probably watching me and informed him the minute they saw me.

After all, Sangmin would have wanted to talk to Jinwoo as soon as possible while making sure Jinho remained clueless.

At least this wasn't official White Tiger Guild business.

That much was clear from Sangmin's reaction to the 50 billion won. He'd panicked when presented with a figure higher than he had authority to clear. If he was going through the proper channels, he would've at least feigned a call to upper management, regardless of whether the amount was possible or not.

Taking all that into account, Jinwoo had suspected a small team of two or three people, and Sangmin had now personally confirmed it to be two.

Thank goodness.

Jinwoo didn't want things to get complicated, but two people? He could easily keep the situation under control. It was obvious they would keep pestering him if he left things as is, so he decided that a small warning was in order.

Jinwoo spoke up. "I'll be honest as well. I've already rejected Yoojin's offer."

Sangmin was floored by this bombshell. "What?"

In that instant, Jinwoo vanished from sight.

"Huh?!" Sangmin sprang to his feet. He quickly spun around but couldn't spot Jinwoo anywhere.

What's going on? Did he move so fast that I couldn't see him?

Caught off guard, Sangmin belatedly realized that a hand had settled on his shoulder.

"Ngh…" A chill ran down his spine.

"Don't turn around." The voice came from his side. Jinwoo had been sitting across from Sangmin one moment and had silently slipped behind him the next.

S-Stealth…?

Sangmin broke into a cold sweat.

I-is he…mad at me…?

Hunters were monsters. Sangmin knew this well from working so closely with them. That was why he always treated them with the utmost respect.

Was the surveillance and tailing the tipping point? I should've requested backup from the guild before I came. But it's not like I could've arranged security when I don't know his rank……

Sangmin's mind was spinning, and his heart was pounding. The sound of his own breath was deafening.

Jinwoo murmured, "Please sit down, nice and slowly. I'd hate to give you a heart attack."

Sangmin hesitantly nodded.

I think it's too late for that……

He did as requested, and Jinwoo reappeared, sliding into the seat next to him.

Although……

Sangmin understood why Jinwoo would say those words. Earlier, the look in Jinwoo's eyes as he asked his single question had made his blood run cold. If Sangmin had met that same gaze directly in this kind of situation, his heart might have stopped altogether.

Is this his way of being considerate?

Still, there was no arguing the fact that Jinwoo was a scary man.

Jinwoo continued. "The reason I rejected Yoojin's offer is because I'm not interested in joining a guild at this time."

Both men kept their eyes straight ahead instead of facing each other as they conversed.

"I s-see."

"Also…" Jinwoo paused for a beat. "I would rather not have anyone else knowing about me."

It was a simple request. He didn't want to join a guild, and he wanted to keep a low profile. Sangmin understood immediately. But there was still one thing he was curious about.

“I-if I may ask, then why are you working with Jinho?”

“He’s helping me with a personal matter. No one else knew about my reawakening, and I think of him as a trustworthy friend, so I asked for his help. Speaking of…”

The weight of Jinwoo’s words seemed to grow heavier.

“If I find there’s talk about me behind my back, may I assume that you or your subordinate will take full responsibility, Manager An?”

Even though Jinwoo had already removed his hand, the threat exerted an even heavier pressure on Sangmin’s shoulder.

This isn’t a bluff.

Sangmin couldn’t explain how he knew this, but he was utterly certain that Jinwoo could do plenty of damage if he wanted to.

My gut feelings about people are almost always right.

Jinwoo had escaped several horrific life-and-death situations. How did the saying go…? What happens in a dungeon stays in a dungeon. Who knows what Jinwoo had gotten up to in there?

And he has the Stealth skill to boot……

The Stealth skill could be a major pain. Skill holders could commit virtually any crime and get away scot-free, if they were careful enough. Security cameras, guards, and alarm systems were all useless.

A bead of sweat rolled down Sangmin’s forehead.

I had no idea he could use Stealth……

Outstanding abilities and a rare skill… No wonder Yoojin had offered him 30 billion.

Not like they’d make a deal unless they knew they’d profit from it.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

Even though he was frightened, Sangmin's heart was beating with excitement. He managed to get out a reply.

"Rest assured, I will keep your secret. I'll make sure Kichul, my subordinate, is also on the same page."

Keeping all this on the down low was preferable to Sangmin anyway. A free agent of his aptitude? There was no reason to spread information and risk competitors finding out about Jinwoo, and it wouldn't hurt to be able to take all the credit for discovering him.

Truth be told, I have to admit that the biggest reason is because I don't want him as an enemy……

"I'll take your word for it, Manager An."

With that, Jinwoo's presence disappeared from the seat next to him. Sangmin peered at his surroundings. The café around him had a peaceful, cozy vibe, and Sangmin felt like he'd been abruptly dropped into another world.

"Haah…" He was rendered speechless and could only press a hand against his racing heart to try and calm down.

Just then, Kichul burst into the café. He had been watching Sangmin and Jinwoo through the window and had dashed to the scene as soon as Jinwoo vanished.

"Manager An!"

Sangmin looked deathly pale, so Kichul worriedly asked, "Sir, what happened? Did negotiations fall through?"

Sangmin's trembling hands fished out a cigarette and brought it to his lips. "Kichul… I think this is an even bigger deal than we thought."

They had to recruit this man no matter what. His mind was consumed by that single thought. Fortunately, it looked like the opportunity was still there.

He was brought back to earth when Kichul lightly grabbed his wrist. “Um…sir…”

Sangmin looked at the younger man just as he was about to light up. “Hmm?”

Kichul glanced around and then whispered cautiously, “This is a nonsmoking area.”

Sangmin crushed the cigarette in his fist. “Seriously…?”

* * *

As soon as Jinwoo got home, he called up his stat window.

Ping!

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 7,229]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 39]

[Title: Wolf Assassin]

[MP: 638]

[Stats]

Strength:	97
Stamina:	59

Agility: 97

Intelligence: 51

Perception: 81

(Available ability points: 0)

Physical damage reduced by: 20 percent

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1, Advanced Dagger Wielding Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.2, Murderous Intent Lv.1, Fatal Strike Lv.1

[Item Equipped]

Warden's Collar (A)

No wonder people are starting to notice.

He'd jumped an incredible twelve levels, from level 27 to 39. This was the first time he'd had such an exponential increase since the first instance dungeon, when he'd gone in as level 1 and emerged as level 17. He'd also been low-level back then, but it was different now. It was a testament to just how many dungeons he'd cleared in a short span of time.

I've only been doing raids with Jinho for four days, and I've already cleared nine dungeons……

On top of that, all nine were C rank, which were considered the highest-level dungeons an individual could clear on their own. The speed at which they were moving was insane, to the point where it was troubling hunters in the area who depended on those very same

dungeons to make a living. Jinho, who had a front-row seat to this spectacle, could only watch dumbfounded at the dizzying pace Jinwoo was maintaining. After all, it was only natural that the higher his level became, the faster he could get it done.

Twelve level-ups within nine dungeons meant he was averaging about one level per raid. There were ten dungeons left, and at that rate, he'd easily surpass level 45 by the time he fulfilled his commitment of nineteen raids.

When his level was in the mid-20s, he'd been able to defeat a B-rank hunter. He couldn't even hazard a guess as to how powerful he was currently.

My heart is racing.

Jinwoo put his hand on his chest and felt his pulse.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

Getting stronger was an absolute thrill that he could have never imagined in the past. To think that entering gates and capturing dungeons could be this exciting.

It's because I can actually check how much stronger I become.

Every time his level increased and his abilities evolved, he could see the difference after each excursion with his own eyes.

Hunting……

Jinwoo felt like he was a real hunter now. It felt right to describe what he was doing as "hunting." There was a saying among animal hunters that locating the next hunting grounds was just as important as the hunt itself.

And Jinwoo's next destination was already set.

The Demon's Castle……

He'd been level 21 or so when he first stepped foot in the Demon's Castle dungeon, and he'd gained almost twenty levels since. He thought it likely that he was more than ready to tackle it now, but remembering Cerberus, the monstrous gatekeeper, gave him pause.

What if I open the castle doors and a horde of creatures ends up overpowering me?

He shuddered at the thought.

It might be possible to successfully escape using the Stealth skill, but he couldn't be certain. A hunter could be lucky ten times over, but a single mistake could lead to death. That was why Jinwoo refused to take any chances. He needed to be absolutely sure he had the power to defeat a group of creatures at Cerberus's level at once.

Cerberus's name was in red.

The color of the monster's name indicated its level of difficulty. The only time he'd ever encountered a monster with a red name had been at the Demon's Castle. Most of the monsters found in instance dungeons accessed by keys from mystery boxes were low-level, including the ones from today's Mirae Department Store instance dungeon. But for some reason…

Am I missing something?

Jinwoo assumed that the only monster he'd seen with a red name was the one encountered at the Demon's Castle, but something niggled at the back of his mind. He was definitely forgetting something.

Was there a red-named monster other than the one in the Demon's Castle?

But that wasn't possible. He'd almost died when he'd fought Cerberus at level 21, so if he'd met a monster labeled in red earlier, he would've—

“Oh!” he blurted out.

Of course. He’d had one other close call with such a monster.

The penalty quest!

The centipedes in the desert had also had names floating in red.

[Poison-Toothed Giant Desert Centipede]

That had been a forced encounter from a while ago, back when he hadn’t made the connection between the new creatures and the term *monsters*, so it took a moment for him to remember them.

If I’m able to defeat those centipedes easily……

He’d have enough confidence to raid the Demon’s Castle. There had been more than one centipede, so he’d also be able to test whether he could handle a coordinated attack from a group of such high-level monsters. The question was, how to reach them…

Is skipping the daily quest the only way to get back there?

Whether he completed the penalty quest or the daily quest, the amount of ability points he would receive would be the same, which meant he had nothing to lose.

I’ll go to the penalty zone tomorrow.

When he thought about the fact that he would be skipping the daily quest on purpose in order to do the penalty quest… It was amusing, considering he’d barely survived the last time.

“I wonder if they’ll drop any items or experience points…”

His lips started to curl up at the thought, but his musings were interrupted as his perception suddenly alerted him to a presence stepping out of the elevator at the end of the hall. The light footsteps were familiar to him.

Jinah’s back.

It was eleven PM, the time his sister usually returned. Jinwoo got up before she could even start rummaging through her pocket for the key.

Click.

"Oooh!" Jinah exclaimed playfully. When he'd first started opening the door, she would get startled, but she'd gotten used to it. If there's one thing humans are good at, it's adapting.

"I'm home."

"Welcome back."

Jinah greeted her brother and wandered off to her room. Jinwoo turned to lock the door after her when…

"Hey, Jinwoo?" Jinah cracked her door open and stuck out her head. "Do you have any days off this week?"

"What for?"

"My homeroom teacher said she needs to have a parent-teacher meeting, but it's fine if you can't make it." She looked anxious, as if this was a special request from her teacher.

A parent-teacher meeting……

Since Jinah was a senior, her teacher would also be busy making sure her students had plans for their futures. Jinwoo would have preferred to avoid the meeting, citing his busy schedule as an excuse, but unfortunately, he had a day off.

Thanks for nothing, Jinho.

After some deliberation, he replied, "Thursday."

"Really? Awesome!" Jinah's expression lit up instantly. Jinwoo sensed she was seconds away from tackling him in a hug, so he quickly waved her off.

“Tsk.” She rolled her eyes at him before retreating back into her room.

A sigh spilled out of Jinwoo. “Haaaah……”

Nonstop raids, revisiting the penalty zone, and now a parent-teacher meeting the day after tomorrow. It was shaping up to be a busy week.

* * *

Jinwoo left home early, since he had a full schedule today. Jinho had booked four gates. It seemed like he was making up for the fact that they were off tomorrow.

Well, considering how fast I’ve been clearing them……

Four or five dungeons a day shouldn’t be a problem. The bigger issue was that it was uncommon for multiple C-rank gates to appear in close proximity, but today was their lucky day.

Jinwoo arrived at the apartment entrance with a spring in his step. However, in place of Jinho’s van in its usual parking spot, he detected a suspicious presence.

“Tsk.”

He would’ve let it go were it not for yesterday’s events.

I thought I made things clear……

Jinwoo easily located a man in a suit lurking nearby. He was looking at his watch, so he didn’t notice Jinwoo approaching until the hunter stepped into his space and spoke up.

“Excuse me.”

The man jumped.

“H-Hunter Sung!”

It was like he'd seen a ghost.

I guess this is the reaction I was hoping for when showing off Stealth.

Jinwoo tutted quietly.

"Are you from the White Tiger Guild?"

"Sorry? Oh, yes, I'm Kichul Hyun of the second administration team of the White Tiger Guild."

This must have been the subordinate that manager had mentioned last night.

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

Kichul peeked at Jinwoo as he extended his hand. He obviously wanted to shake, but Jinwoo wasn't in the mood to indulge him. After a brief silence, Kichul turned red and withdrew his hand.

"I believe I made it very clear that I am not interested in joining a guild."

Kichul hastily waved. "Oh, that's not why I'm here."

He then offered Jinwoo the travel mug in his other hand.

"What's this?"

Jinwoo peered at the multicolored liquid in the semitranslucent bottle curiously.

Kichul puffed out his chest. "It's a green smoothie. I made it myself, so I can vouch for the quality!"

"……"

As Kichul continued to offering it to him, Jinwoo felt obligated to accept the juice.

"So you've been waiting here since the crack of dawn just to give me this?"

“Yes, of course. It’s for your health!”

Jinwoo briefly wondered why the White Tiger Guild was invested in his health.

Kichul bowed with a bright smile as he left. “I’ll be seeing you, sir!” He waved good-bye, and Jinwoo waved the bottle at him in response.

“……What an interesting guy.”

As soon as Kichul was out of sight, Jinwoo examined the contents of the travel mug. He’d heard tales of top insurance salesmen winning over customers by bringing them bottled drinks, but this was the first time he’d heard of anyone bribing someone with a homemade green smoothie.

In any case, I can’t just throw it out.

Not that Kichul would, but even if the smoothie was poisoned, it wouldn’t be a problem, since Jinwoo had the detoxing buff. He figured he may as well give it a taste.

Slurp.

Jinwoo’s eyes lit up as he tried a sip.

Not bad.

Just then, he heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Boss!”

He turned around as Jinho approached. The always sunny-faced Jinho gestured in the direction Kichul had left.

“Boss, who was that? The guy who was just here.”

Jinwoo merely answered, “Insurance salesman.”

“Aha.” The ever-optimistic Jinho accepted this answer without a second thought.

Jinwoo looked around. “Where’s your car?”

If Jinho had spotted Kichul, it meant he’d also arrived earlier, but his questionable van was nowhere in sight.

“I parked it over there, boss.”

“How come?”

“You know the murders with no discernible pattern recently committed in the area? People have been eyeing me suspiciously, since I don’t live here.”

Jinwoo bobbed his head. The murders had been all over the news lately. The victims were mostly young women, and there had been two incidents this month already. And then, to see an unfamiliar black van loitering at the entrance of the apartment building…no wonder residents were suspicious.

Slurp, sluuuurp.

Just then, Jinwoo finished off the smoothie. He shook the bottle to get at any last drops before heading off to where the van was parked.

“Let’s roll.”

“Yessir!”

* * *

This particular dungeon was crawling with lizardmen.

Lizardmen, as the name implied, were a cross between lizards and humans. They were bipedal, could wield weapons, and some could even use magic. Lizardman mages were rare, but they could be a handful.

One such mage conjured up a fireball in each hand.

Magic?

When Jinwoo attempted to get closer, the two lizardmen guarding the mage thrust their spears at him. They had quick, reptilian reflexes, and Jinwoo was forced to jump back, narrowly avoiding impalement. Seconds later, fireballs came hurtling toward him.

Fwoooom!

Fwoom!

“Look out, boss!” Jinho shouted from where he was watching the fight at a safe distance.

Kaboom!

Explosions shook the narrow cave, and thick smoke filled the area.

Cough, cough!

Jinho coughed hard as he covered his nose with the back of his hand, but he was more concerned about Jinwoo than himself. The attacks from lizardman mages were quite destructive. His fears proved unwarranted, though, as Jinwoo emerged from the smoke unscathed.

Jinho was starry-eyed.

Amazing!

Despite lizardmen being some of the toughest opponents one could encounter in a C-rank dungeon, Jinwoo had faced a mage’s attack head-on without a scratch. He also seemed to be getting faster every day.

I’m probably imagining that, right……?

Jinwoo spat out the soot that had fallen into his mouth.

“Ptoo!”

What landed on the ground was black.

These bastards……

Jinwoo was not happy about having to breathe in the ash from some lizardman's flashy magic trick, and his scowl put his displeasure on clear display.

[Skill: Murderous Intent has been activated.]

Daggers shot out from his furious gaze.

[Debuff: Panic has been activated.]

[All the opponent's abilities will decrease by 50 percent for 1 minute.]

The lizardmen exposed to Murderous Intent became agitated.

Skreek?

Skraaawk?

Jinwoo didn't miss a beat and threw Kasaka's Venom Fang with all his might. The dagger flew straight and lodged itself between a guard's eyes.

Shhhnk!

It was too fast for a lizardman with reduced speed to dodge.

Skraaaw! The other guard wailed as it witnessed its comrade's death. When it lunged at Jinwoo with its spear, though, it missed. Jinwoo had suddenly disappeared.

Skrakaaaw! The mage was worked up. *Skrakaaaw!*

As the mage repeated its cry, the guard turned to it and began screeching.

Skreek!

The guard bared its teeth as it approached the mage, which refused to back down.

Skrawk!

Right then…

Kak!

A hole burst open in the guard's chest. The startled mage, now covered in blood, scurried back.

Skree?

Hwoosh.

As Stealth deactivated, a spear appeared in the guard's chest, and the one holding the shaft was Jinwoo. He let go, and the impaled lizardman fell lifeless to the ground.

Whump!

As it did, Jinwoo retrieved Kasaka's Venom Fang from the other guard's forehead.

Skreeeeeaaaawk!

Red flames flared in the mage's hands, but Jinwoo didn't give it a chance it needed.

Dash!

In an instant, the distance between Jinwoo and the mage shrank, and the mage's eyes widened. Its reptilian orbs looked slimier up close.

Fwoosh!

Jinwoo evaded the flames shooting from the mage's hands, slipped behind it, and stabbed the dagger at its spine.

Fatal Strike!

Shhhk!

The mage shrieked. *Skreeeee!*

Jinwoo's second stab to the back resulted in a feebler scream.

Shhhk!

Gak!

The mage coughed up blood as it toppled forward.

Whump!

Jinwoo mentally pumped his fist in victory. That was a nice, clean fight.

Yessss!

The system chimed as if to celebrate his win.

Ping!

[You have leveled up!]

[The Player has reached the required level.]

A strange message followed the usual one.

The required level?

He had no idea what that could mean, but when the chime rang again, his heart started beating so fast that it almost hurt, and he had to make an effort to calm it.

Ping!

[A job-change quest has arrived.]

[Would you like to accept the job-change quest?] (Y/N)

A…a job-change quest…?

Jinwoo was so focused on leveling up and increasing his stats that he'd forgotten about one line in his stat window.

[Name: Jinwoo Sung] [Level: 40]

[Job: None]

The third slot of the stat window indicated his job.

Changing my job means……

He had an opportunity to change it from nothing to something. He would have a job.

In most video games, characters benefited greatly from changing their job, so it stood to reason that it would function similarly within this system.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

His heartbeats were deafening. After realizing he was one step closer to his ultimate goal, he just couldn't calm down.

[Would you like to accept the job-change quest?] (Y/N)

The choices kept flashing before his eyes.

Of course I……

What kind of idiot would waste an opportunity like this? Jinwoo was more than happy to accept the job-change quest. Except…something stopped him.

Hang on.

There was no way to tell what kind of quest he'd get. Both his instincts and his rationality were now sounding alarms.

I'm inside a dungeon.

Dungeons were the most dangerous places in the world. Even if he now had plenty of experience with C-rank dungeons, a dungeon was still a dungeon. There was no need to intentionally court danger.

Besides, Jinho was here, too. It wasn't that Jinwoo didn't trust him, but there wasn't any reason to reveal the system to him or attempt to explain whatever strange phenomenon might occur when he changed jobs. Things might get too complicated.

Besides, depending on the quest, Jinho might be in danger.

What if a monster appeared out of thin air?

That would actually be preferable.

Monsters, he could defeat, but it could be a more extreme quest. The two urgent quests came to mind.

It could tell me to get rid of the nearest hunter.

And that was just one example, though this was only a theory for now.

Jinho appeared in that instant. “Boss!”

It looked like one of the fireballs had landed near him as he was covered in soot.

“How did you disappear and reappear during the fight? Did you always have that skill?”

Jinho’s face was flushed, and his eyes were sparkling with excitement. He seemed fascinated by the Stealth skill.

I think his current state is much more fascinating, though.

Jinwoo took a handkerchief out of his inventory instead of answering. It had been a daily quest reward from the day before yesterday.

“B-boss?”

He rubbed Jinho’s face with it.

“Ack! Gaaah!”

The once-white fabric was now black. Jinho took the handkerchief Jinwoo passed over and realized his state. Embarrassed, he quietly wiped himself clean.

“Jinho.”

“Yes, boss?”

“I just remembered that I have something I need to do.”

Jinho spun around.

“Does that mean you have to leave?”

“Once I’m done here, yeah.”

“Understood. Then I’ll cancel the reservations for the other gates.”

Jinho didn’t want to show it in front of Jinwoo, but he found the cancelations regrettable.

I’m running pretty low on cash…

He was funding this entire operation with his own savings, and he had no other paid work. He was limited in how much he could borrow because he was keeping everything a secret from his father. Association policy stated that he couldn’t get refunds for canceling. It was basically flushing money down the toilet, so how could he not feel bad?

To make matters worse, Jinho was spending a lot more than he’d planned due to their unique method of clearing gates. That was more money gone. His shoulders slumped helplessly.

However, Jinwoo nonchalantly responded, “Why cancel and waste money?”

Jinho blinked. “Huh? But if you don’t enter a gate within two days after booking, the permit gets revoked anyway, boss.”

Jinwoo was fully aware of this.

“Leave it to me.”

Did Jinwoo already have a solution? Jinho had no idea but felt he could count on him.

* * *

Meanwhile, at the White Tiger Guild Headquarters.

“Manager An! Do you have a single thought in your head?”

A big, booming voice erupted from the offices of the second administration team.

The voice belonged to Yoonho Baek, the guild master and CEO of the White Tiger Guild. It was never a good thing when the big boss himself descended from the top floor to read someone the riot act.

“Why are there no gates reserved to train our new recruits? Do you realize we’re already three days behind schedule?”

All the other employees kept their heads down, worried they’d be next on the firing line. Manager An kept his eyes on the floor as President Baek shouted and gestured wildly.

“……”

Sangmin was experienced enough to know not to actually reply and further rile his boss, the way his subordinate Kichul did. It was best to keep his mouth shut in situations like this. It didn’t matter what he thought.

President Baek shook the report he’d received that morning from the second administration team.

“You call this an excuse? You couldn’t book any gates because you were *outbid* by another group? Does the guild not have enough money? What, are they funded by some little rich kid?”

It was tempting to answer that question, but Sangmin steeled himself and kept quiet. He had promised Jinwoo, after all.

If I say anything now, I’ll have to out those two.

Oblivious to Sangmin’s internal conflict, the president continued shaking the building with his bellows.

“I don’t care if it costs one or two hundred million won—do whatever it takes and book a damn gate! Understood?”

As if on cue, Sangmin’s phone rang.

“Ah! I’m really sorry that I missed your call. Was with a friend, so I was shy shy shy…”

Sangmin sneaked a peek at the caller ID, and his eyes widened. “Sorry, sir, I’ll just be a minute.”

“……”

The main job of the second administration team was recruitment, and much of it came down to good timing. Sangmin was the manager, and although Baek was still seething, it would be foolish to keep Sangmin from answering his calls.

“Well? Take it.” Baek acquiesced.

The manager excused himself with a quick nod and promptly answered the phone. “Hello, Sangmin An of the White Tiger Guild speaking.”

Baek crossed his arms and waited for the conversation to end.

“Yes. Yes, understood. If you wait for us at the café on the first floor, we’ll be right there. Great, we’ll see you then.”

Sangmin hung up and rapidly said, “Sir, I have to head out for a while.”

This was Sangmin An, the ace of the second administration team. If this was a matter where he was willing to sprint out in the middle of a tense situation after a single phone call…

Baek’s face softened slightly. “Is this related to a new recruit?”

“Yes, sir.”

Judging by the confidence on Sangmin's face, Baek surmised that something important was at hand.

Manager An is personally heading out to scout this new recruit?

That meant this candidate had to be exceptional. Baek's scrunched expression suddenly smoothed into a delighted smile. "Far be it from me to stand in the way of our recruitment expert. Don't worry about things here and get going."

Sangmin bowed again and quickly ordered, "Assistant Manager Hyun, bring the contract and seal."

"Yes, sir!"

The two were out in a flash. Once they'd left, Baek surreptitiously interrogated a male staffer. "So what's the deal? What has Manager An being so proactive?"

The male employee shot an imploring look at the female coworker beside him to come to his rescue, but she shook her head. Her eyes made it clear she didn't know, either.

Shoot……

He hesitantly replied, "The thing is, sir…I'm not quite sure……"

He expected the president to lose it right then and there, but surprisingly, he remained quiet.

He's up to something, and he's even hiding it from his subordinates?

Baek rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Manager An was often credited with single-handedly building up White Tiger to what it was today, and here he was, hanging off this potential recruit's every word……

Is he about to make another big score?

A smile bloomed on President Baek's face.

* * *

Why is this coffee so bitter?

Jinwoo frowned. He'd ordered espresso thinking it would be similar to instant coffee, but it tasted more like bitter herbal medicine, not to mention the price was exorbitant for something that tasted so awful.

Six thousand won could've bought me a few canned coffees, too……

He was trying to figure out how many sugars he had to pour in to make it taste more like canned coffee when…

Ting-a-ling.

The café door opened, and Sangmin and Kichul entered.

"Over here." Jinwoo waved his hand.

Sangmin's and Kichul's faces lit up as soon as they spotted Jinwoo, like two kids who'd spotted Santa Claus.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon," Sangmin offered in greeting as he sat down across from Jinwoo, with Kichul taking the seat next to his manager. He exchanged nods with Jinwoo. Sangmin wanted to strike while the iron was hot, so he reached for the contract as soon as he was seated.

"First, let's discuss terms."

It was clear he was extremely eager to get Jinwoo to sign with them, but Jinwoo instantly rejected him.

"I'm not here about the contract."

Sangmin's hand stopped in midair. Kichul also looked dumbfounded.

The manager haltingly asked, "So then…what brings you to the White Tiger Guild…?"

His disappointment was as great as his expectations. The super-rookie had walked in on his own two feet but refused to sign as soon as he saw the contract. Had he changed his mind in that short span of time?

As Sangmin tried to make sense of it, Jinwoo answered him mildly.

“I’m here because I want to help you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Pardon?”

Sangmin and Kichul shared the same reaction. As they exchanged surprised glances, Jinwoo continued calmly.

“You said you were having a rough time training new recruits because our squad was sweeping up all the C-rank gates.”

“That’s correct. We can’t exactly take new recruits to higher-rank dungeons because we’re having trouble reserving C-rank ones.”

“And that’s why I’m here.”

Sangmin cocked his head. “Sorry, but I’m not sure I follow…”

Jinwoo decided to stop beating around the bush. “We wish to sell you three permits we have for C-rank dungeons.”

“Ah.” Kichul let out a noise. The two White Tiger employees finally grasped Jinwoo’s intentions.

As he put away the contract, Sangmin pointed out, “If you really want to help us, then wouldn’t it be more efficient to stop booking C-rank dungeons?”

Jinwoo shook his head. “We have our own reasons for needing them.”

“Then what about today…?”

Jinwoo smiled pleasantly. “I wanted to help you out with your dilemma, of course.”

Could they trust those words? Before Sangmin could begin calculating everything in his head, Jinwoo continued.

“This offer only stands for today. We’re also in a position where we can’t postpone our raids. Miss this chance, and you won’t get another for a while.”

It was like he was on a home shopping show, promoting a product “just about to sell out.”

Hmm……

Sangmin was torn. Seoul wasn’t the only city with gates. If they had to, they could take their recruits to train elsewhere. The problem with that was they could set off sparks with established guilds or strike squads in the area.

What’s more, doing so could give whatever large guilds overlooking those regions, like the Fame Guild in Honam or the Knights Guild in Yeongnam, a reason to look down on them. The White Tiger Guild could develop a reputation as incompetents unable to train their rookies on their home turf.

Hmm… We wouldn’t be able to deny it, either.

Because that was the cold, hard truth. And if other prominent guilds considered them a laughingstock, what self-respecting newbie would want to work for them? Public perception was everything for a guild.

“Okay.” Sangmin came to a conclusion after much deliberation. “Please sell us the permits. Three is perfect for our needs. How much would you like for them?”

The White Tiger Guild had plenty of money, but there was no point trying to compete financially with Yoojin Construction. Besides,

Sangmin also wanted to maintain a good relationship with Jinwoo. Shouldn't he be grateful Jinwoo was willing to give him the gates?

He was less grateful for the price.

"Three hundred million won for one, so nine hundred million for all three."

"Gck!" Sangmin and Kichul almost choked.

"That's too mu—" Kichul tried to interrupt, but Sangmin quickly stopped him.

Something similar had happened the last time they met. When they couldn't agree on the price, Jinwoo had cut off the conversation without a second thought. This situation had come full circle, in a way. If he passed this up, he'd have no choice but to book a C-rank gate later or, worse, train the new recruits in a different city.

I should at least try to negotiate.

It would be a shame to fold so quickly. No matter how one looked at it, 300 million won per gate was practically extortion. These days, Jinho's squad paid an average of 100 million for a permit. Asking for three times that was reaching, and both parties were aware of that fact.

He started high, knowing we'd negotiate the price.

Sangmin recalled what the president had said in the office.

"I don't care if it costs one or two hundred million won—do whatever it takes and book a damn gate!"

That was tantamount to getting the president's approval right there, and he wouldn't be able to deny it as everyone in the second administration team had heard those exact words.

Sangmin took a breath and made his counteroffer. “Three hundred million won is too much even for us, so how about two hundred million wo—”

“Deal.”

Jinwoo stuck out his hand before Sangmin could finish his sentence. In his confusion, Sangmin instinctively took it.

“Th-that’s it?”

“Yes, two hundred million won per gate. Please wire the money to our account.”

It all happened in a blink, but Sangmin was relieved it had gone as smoothly as it did.

He lightly shook Jinwoo’s hand. “Thank you very much.”

“Glad to be of help.” Jinwoo beamed.

Sangmin could now afford to relax a little. Not only had he resolved the training problem, but he’d gotten a little bit closer to Jinwoo.

Deals are based on trust, after all.

Indeed, he would build up his relationship with Jinwoo step-by-step, and Jinwoo would be on his side in no time. He shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

Sangmin cheered mentally.

Jinwoo was the first to stand. “I suppose I’ll see you around. Oh, and here.” He handed Kichul a paper bag with the travel mug inside.

“Thank you for the smoothie. It was really good.”

“I’m glad it was to your taste.” Kichul blushed as he accepted the bag.

With that, Jinwoo left the café. As soon as he was far enough from Sangmin and Kichul, Jinwoo gave Jinho a call. After a few rings, Jinho's excited voice picked up.

"Boss! Six hundred million won actually came through!"

"……" Jinwoo wore a satisfied grin.

It had been a successful transaction. He was able to sell the permits for double the price they'd paid instead of letting them go to waste. It was a huge win.

Jinho was incredulous.

"Boss, how'd you do it? Who did you sell those C-rank gates to?"

"That's a trade secret."

"Huh?"

"Rest up. I'll see you in two days."

Leaving Jinho baffled, Jinwoo swiftly hung up.

Click.

Later that night, at the office of the second administration team…

Kichul urgently approached Sangmin.

"Sir! Sir!"

"What?" Sangmin took his eyes off his computer monitor. Kichul urgently pointed at his phone.

"Please take a look!"

"What is it?" Sangmin's eyes narrowed as he focused on the screen.

This is……

It was the Hunter's Association official website, accessible only by hunters. Specifically, Kichul was on the page that listed gate locations and showed permit auction prices in real time.

“What the…? Why are there so many unclaimed C-rank gates in our area?”

“And they’re all going for less than ten million.”

“That means……” Sangmin’s mind raced. “Jinho’s squad didn’t book a single gate today.”

He then remembered what Jinwoo had said.

“I have time on Thursday.”

Tomorrow was Thursday. Jinho’s squad hadn’t been planning to go on a raid from the start. Sangmin had unwittingly overpaid for the permits.

“Huh……” Sangmin had to laugh.

The clue had been there all along, but he’d come to the realization too late. That was his mistake, but at least it had helped calm down the president.

“We’ve been duped, Manager An.”

At that moment, Sangmin received a text.

Ding!

It was from Jinwoo.

With this, we’re even. I’ll forget the fact that you spied on me.

He’s a tricky one, isn’t he?

Sangmin swallowed his laugh.

If this made them even, as Jinwoo said, it was a win for the White Tiger Guild, since the ultimate goal was to recruit Jinwoo. And to them, it wasn’t that much money anyway.

“Let’s think of this as an investment in Jinwoo.”

The hope was to see a return on that investment. With a twinkle in his eye, Sangmin closed the message.

* * *

After sending the text, Jinwoo scanned his surroundings. Not a soul nearby. He was currently in the woods, as he'd chosen an infrequently visited hillside for safety's sake. It was currently 5:44 PM, so he didn't expect any hikers at this hour. Plus, he'd picked a spot off the beaten path.

Shall I get going?

Jinwoo accessed his inbox.

[Would you like to accept the job-change quest?] (Y/N)

The message popped up like it had been waiting for him.

Gulp.

Jinwoo swallowed nervously. It was nerve-racking not knowing what kind of quest he would get, but more than that, he felt excited. When Jinwoo had been searching for a suitable place to accept the quest using his phone, he'd also looked up information about changing jobs.

—New skills.

—Progress rewards.

—Job-exclusive weapons.

—Job-related quests.

…and so on.

This was all information from video games, but the general consensus was that changing jobs had tons of benefits.

And for me, level 40 was when I could do it.

Of course, it wasn't all good news. Jinwoo also came across some more ominous posts online.

—What do you do if you chose the wrong job?

—Shit, if I'd known, I would've picked a different class.

—I made the wrong decision, so I'm now giving up my favorite game and going back to my boring reality.

—Do I have to delete my character?

……Well, that was to be expected when looking through video game forums. Jinwoo didn't think he had too much to worry about, since he fought almost exclusively using a dagger anyway and all his skills were reminiscent of an assassin type.

Like dagger-related skills or Stealth.

Plus, he'd heavily invested his ability points into strength and agility, so he couldn't imagine getting any job other than an assassin class.

With that on his mind, he summoned Kasaka's Venom Fang.

Hwoom.

The hilt of the dagger fit perfectly in his hand.

This feels right to me.

He gave a resolute nod. With the weapon gripped tightly, Jinwoo looked at the message floating in midair.

Okay then……

Jinwoo readied himself to face the unexpected and submitted his answer.

[Would you like to accept the job-change quest?] (Y/N)

Accept.

As soon as he did, more messages popped up.

Ping!

[You have accepted the job-change quest.]

[The dungeon for the job-change quest will now be generated.]

The dungeon will be……generated?

Before he could begin to analyze what that meant, things started changing before his very eyes.

Vmmm.

A large, dark hole appearing at his feet was just the beginning.

Vmmm, vmmm.

The hole started out the size of a bean, then grew to the size of a coin, then a volleyball, until it was finally big enough for a person to step in and out of.

Is that……?

Jinwoo stared in wonder. He'd expected to receive another message containing the details of the quest when he accepted, but this…? What appeared directly in front of him was nothing short of a gate.

It made an actual gate……

This was no different from others he'd seen, if a little on the small side.

The system sent a message as if prodding him.

[Please enter the dungeon through the gate.]

Okay, take it easy.

Jinwoo calmed himself down.

Right. If he thought about it, it made no difference whether he entered a dungeon with a key or through a gate. He was just surprised to witness the creation of an artificial gate. He'd only ever entered ones that already existed; he'd never seen any birthed.

That was when a new question popped into his head.

Wait…… Can other hunters also enter this?

There was no way he could test it. There weren't any other hunters nearby, and he didn't have anyone who would come running at his call…right? Jinho came to mind for a second, but he quickly dismissed that thought.

If something went wrong, I wouldn't be able to handle the consequences.

The message flashed again as if impatient.

Ping!

[Please enter the dungeon through the gate.]

The chime snapped him out of his thoughts. He slapped his cheeks with both hands to get his head back in the game.

Can't get distracted now.

If he succeeded in this quest, he would be able to change his job and reap the benefits. He had no idea what would happen if he failed. It was time to focus.

"Whew."

Jinwoo let out a deep breath, held Kasaka's Venom Fang in a reverse grip, and leaped down the gate.

* * *

[You have entered the dungeon.]

Huh?

Jinwoo went in expecting the worst, but to his surprise, there was nothing there. It was an average cave-like dungeon.

"It's just the same……?" He'd heard that some higher-level dungeons were portals to the other world, so he'd been apprehensive. Thankfully, his worry was unfounded.

Instead, he received a peculiar message.

Ping!

[In this area, potions and access to the store are forbidden, and you will not recover your stats when leveling up.]

Jinwoo confirmed there were no magic beasts in the vicinity and put away his dagger.

……Looks like this won't be easy.

Perhaps because the quest was for a job change, there were tons of restrictions. Not being able to recover his stats using potions or level-ups was alarming.

That means damage is going to add up.

If he got wounded, it could all be over. Since he couldn't heal, he would have to exercise extreme caution.

I can't afford to lose focus.

Jinwoo closed the inbox and, as usual, tested the exit.

[You cannot exit until the job-change process is complete.]

The message came up as soon as he touched the gate. He pushed with all his might, but it wouldn't budge.

"……"

Jinwoo withdrew his hand.

It's blocked.

A dungeon of unknown rank, no stat recovery, and no exit… This was a high-risk dungeon. Even the bravest hunter would tread lightly here.

But high-risk isn't the end of the world.

He had learned through experience that the higher the risk, the higher the reward. If the restrictions were any indication, didn't that mean there would be an incredible prize at the end of the tunnel? There was only one way to find out.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Jinwoo took a step forward. He looked ahead and could see only an endless cavern. He couldn't sense any magic beasts nearby.

Should I refer to them as monsters, since I'm in a system-generated dungeon?

Though the fact that they were creatures was the same.

Besides that, there was one more difference: Torches lined the cave wall.

Torches instead of glow stones, huh…

Unfortunately, torches weren't the best light sources, so despite the sheer number of them, it still wasn't enough to illuminate the whole place, leaving shadows creeping here and there.

Hwoooo…

The mixture of shades and stillness made this dungeon more dismal than others.

I can see fine, but……

The problem was the atmosphere of the place. Jinwoo pulled out the nearest torch and held it in front of him. The path seemed to brighten.

Much better.

Jinwoo smiled with satisfaction. He gave a quick glance behind him before extending the torch to light the way ahead and moving farther in.

* * *

How long had he been walking? After quite a while, he came across a turn in the road and sensed multiple presences around the corner.

Finally.

Jinwoo carefully put down the torch and stood upright.

Hwoom.

A dagger replaced the torch in his right hand. He briefly entertained the idea of using the Stealth skill to get this over with quickly but dismissed the thought after remembering how much mana it ate up. He wasn't allowed to use potions to replenish his mana here, and he didn't want to waste it, leaving himself vulnerable at a crucial moment.

……It's coming.

Jinwoo pressed his back against the wall and waited for the enemy to turn the corner.

Clunk, clunk.

The creature's footsteps made an almost metallic sound that drew closer.

Clunk, clunk.

Jinwoo furrowed his brow at the unfamiliar noise.

Does it have a weapon made of chains…?

He was curious but curbed his impatience. He'd find out soon enough.

Five. Four. Three.

He reversed his grip on his dagger and held his breath to avoid alerting his enemy with his breathing.

Two. One.

Clunk, clunk.

The monster's shadow was finally visible.

……Zero.

At the end of his countdown, the creature appeared in view.

Jinwoo aimed for its neck.

Klang!

The sound of metal on metal rang, and the dagger didn't penetrate.

Armor?

Jinwoo's eyes bulged, and he took a step back as he processed what he'd attacked.

"A human?"

It was a knight sporting full-body armor, face hidden behind a helmet. Jinwoo called out just in case.

"Hey!"

The knight didn't respond but rushed straight at Jinwoo.

Thud, thud, thud!

The knight charged, shoulder extended, but Jinwoo easily avoided the attack by twisting out of the way. Unable to curb its momentum, the knight came to a halt a ways behind Jinwoo.

Maybe it's not human?

After being so close to the knight, Jinwoo was certain; he couldn't sense a heartbeat as would have been the case with a normal person. The knight didn't seem human. It was a type of magic beast—no, a monster—he'd never seen before. It was covered in armor from head to toe.

But it really feels like……

Jinwoo couldn't shake the feeling he was fighting a person.

Shing!

The knight turned and drew its sword. It seemed to share Jinwoo's intention of killing its opponent. Sensing the mutual hostility, Jinwoo sharpened his gaze.

Dash!

[Your speed has increased by 40 percent.]

He who strikes first wins! Jinwoo moved in before the monster could.

Whoosh!

Jinwoo avoided the knight's hasty swing and took multiple stabs at the armor.

Klang, klang!

But he didn't inflict any damage.

The armor's too thick.

Not only was it thick, but the surface was smooth, making Jinwoo's dagger merely glance off.

The knight swung its sword horizontally.

Whoosh!

Jinwoo ducked and narrowly avoided getting struck in the head. Since the knight swung so wide, there was a big gap in its attack—a

perfect opening! Jinwoo got closer and focused all his power into this attack.

Fatal Strike!

Shunk.

The tip of the dagger pierced the knight's armor.

Did it work?

But it was as if nothing had happened, and the knight slammed its blade down at full power.

Shwoom!

Jinwoo threw himself out of the way.

Klang!

The sword struck the ground, casting sparks.

"……"

Jinwoo moved back and found his footing again. His dagger was still stuck in the creature's side.

"Tsk." He clicked his tongue.

It's not that high-level.

That was his objective evaluation. The knight moved slowly because of its armor, and its attack patterns were simple. The only thing it had going for it was that its defense against bladed weapons was off the charts.

Jinwoo rolled up his sleeves.

Impenetrable skin? Been there, done that.

His confidence came from a previous encounter.

The boss monster Blue Venom-Fanged Kasaka had broken a mana-powered steel sword with a single headbutt, but Jinwoo had managed to defeat that gigantic snake.

Compared to the kasaka, this knight is, well……

The reassuring thought brought a tiny smile to his face.

Thud, thud, thud!

The knight trusted its armor and charged at Jinwoo again.

See? It's a simple creature.

The hunter easily dodged the knight's shoulder and moved behind it to put it in a headlock.

Krrrk!

Of course, the creature's armor also protected its neck and kept it from being suffocated.

Krrrrrk!

Jinwoo's muscles bulged, and his veins popped out as he squeezed with all his might. His aim wasn't to strangle the knight. He gritted his teeth hard and put all his strength into it. As he did…

Craaack!

The knight's helmet popped off with a terrible noise. Jinwoo was finally putting his over-100 strength stat to good use.

Got it!

With its head separated from its body, the knight dropped to its knees, lifeless.

Thud!

[You have defeated a knight.]

A short and sweet message appeared to signal the end of the fight. Something sparkled on the knight's armor to indicate the presence of loot, but Jinwoo's attention was elsewhere.

What? There's nothing inside?

The helmet in his hand was empty. Just in case, he checked inside the armor, but that was empty as well.

So I fought a moving suit of armor?

As he reached that conclusion, two more knights rounded the corner. They were rather late to the fight.

Clunk, clunk.

The knights—or rather, the suits of armor—drew their swords in unison upon discovering Jinwoo.

Shing!

Shing!

Jinwoo tossed the helmet aside and warmed up his neck and shoulders. He already knew how to deal with these adversaries.

This is where it starts.

Thud, thud, thud, thud!

Jinwoo smirked at the charging knights. The first stage of this dungeon would be a piece of cake.

* * *

Perhaps it was because of all the restrictions, but the rate of item drops was quite high.

Jinwoo had defeated only three knights, but two had each dropped an item, which made the current rate 66.6 percent. He'd never seen

such a high drop rate anywhere else. Instance dungeons usually yielded a few miscellaneous items or things to sell in the shop.

[You have discovered Item: High-Rank Knight's Chestplate. Would you like to acquire it?]

Of course I would.

The equipment vanished off the headless knight that remained kneeling and materialized by Jinwoo's feet.

Clunk.

The information screen for the chestplate appeared.

[ITEM: HIGH-RANK KNIGHT'S CHESTPLATE]
Acquisition Difficulty: B

Category: Protective gear

Physical damage reduction: +7 percent

(If strength is under 80, movement speed will decrease.)

An additional physical damage reduction by 7 percent! Combined with his current stats, he could decrease any physical damage he took by 27 percent.

If I can get it to 100 percent, does that mean I'd be impervious?

He considered the possibilities for a moment until it sank in that a B-rank item gave a 7 percent reduction. It wasn't like the percentage for an A-rank item would suddenly go to 30 or 40 percent. Taking that into account, reaching 100 percent seemed to be a lost cause.

Still, every little bit helps……

If he kept at it, the continuous stat buffs could become an extremely powerful tool. He'd already had Jinho demonstrate the usefulness of quality items.

How do I use this thing?

He picked up the chestplate, and as expected, he received a message about equipping the armor.

[Would you like to put on Item: High-Rank Knight's Chestplate?]

The chestplate was a heavy piece of metal that would've been awkward to wear in daily life. If he hadn't tried on the Warden's Collar before, he would've spent a considerable amount of time deliberating before resigning himself, but that wasn't the case.

Yes.

Ping!

[You have put on Item: High-Rank Knight's Chestplate.]

The equipment vanished from his hands, and Jinwoo called up the stat window to check the result.

[Physical damage reduced by: 27 percent]

It worked!

He placed a hand on his chest but couldn't feel the heavy piece of armor. He tried moving around but still couldn't feel a difference. It was exactly like when he had put on the Warden's Collar.

Great.

Next, Jinwoo turned his gaze to the knight he'd left crumpled in a corner. It was so badly damaged that it didn't look like it had anything salvageable, but a telltale glow indicated it held an item.

[You have discovered Item: Leather Pouch. Would you like to acquire it?]

Jinwoo felt a little guilty for the destruction he'd wrought on the knight. He wasn't used to fighting barehanded and had trouble controlling his own strength.

……

With a solemn expression, Jinwoo approached the knight and extended his hand.

Acquire.

[You have opened Item: Leather Pouch.]

[It contains 30,000 gold.]

[You have acquired 30,000 gold.]

Huh.

He'd expected the pouch to appear in his hands, but he'd instead received the gold directly. Was this item somehow different from the usual ones? He checked his inventory and was amazed to see that 30,000 gold had been added to his balance.

[Balance: 863,400 gold]

I got a whopping 30,000 gold…?

Maybe it was because knights usually carried around more items? He recalled how, in video games, the player would often acquire more by defeating humanlike monsters over other creatures. Thinking about it, it made sense that one would get more items from a human being than an animal or an insect. It was possible this rule of thumb was being reflected in this situation as well.

In any case, this was welcome news. He was saving up gold to buy items from the shop, so a find like this was a big help.

Is there anything else I can take?

People often say that there's no end to humanity's greed. Jinwoo set aside his main reason for being here and inspected the knights with avarice shining in his eyes. All the suits of armor were worthless, as he'd crushed them in battle, but the swords caught his eye.

I can work with those.

The swords looked shiny and brand-new. Since they weren't daggers, he had no plans to use them himself, but he figured he could sell them in the shop. If that was a no go, he could always make a pretty penny selling them to hunters.

Jinwoo picked up a sword, but as soon as he did, it quickly rusted over and crumbled through his fingers.

"Oh……"

It happened in the blink of an eye.

Is this because it's not an item I'm allowed to take?

That was too bad, but there was nothing he could do about it. Jinwoo dusted off his hands and picked up the torch he'd put down earlier. He turned the corner where the knights had been lurking and saw that the path continued on with no end in sight.

"……"

He still had a long way to go.

* * *

It was like reviewing his notes for a test. It was a funny comparison, but that was what popped into Jinwoo's head.

In the past two hours, he'd run into four different kinds of monsters within the dungeon: knights, mages, assassins, and archers.

"Using Stealth this time?"

An assassin suddenly dropped from his radar. Jinwoo didn't panic but instead increased his perception, and he soon picked up on the presence of someone sneaking up behind him.

Clang.

He blocked the assassin's dagger with Kasaka's Venom Fang, sending his assailant stumbling and leaving an opening for a quick counterattack. Venom Fang hit the assassin's chest dead center.

Shunk!

[You have defeated an assassin.]

[You have leveled up!]

The fatally wounded assassin silently disintegrated into a puff of black smoke.

Thump.

Its leather clothes fell to the ground.

Why are all these monsters humanoid?

Every time he killed one, it felt like… Jinwoo shook his head. Thankfully, he couldn't see their faces. The knights wore helmets, assassins and archers wore leather headgear, and mages wore hooded robes.

Jinwoo was about to continue along the road when suddenly…

Flash! There was a burst of light right in front of his eyes. A mage that had been casting under its breath from a hiding spot had completed its spell.

Kaboom!

Then came an earsplitting explosion! Alas, by that time, Jinwoo had already made his way behind the mage.

"……!"

Sensing a threat from behind, the panicked mage rushed to cast another spell, but Jinwoo was faster, making a diagonal strike with his dagger. The mage also turned to smoke.

Thump.

Jinwoo looked down at the empty robe on the ground, then returned his dagger to his inventory.

Got hit by one of those attacks once before when I dropped my guard.

Jinwoo had actually been on high alert as soon as he had sensed mana coalescing in one area. It was something he'd learned when facing Gyuhwan Jo's light magic. Jinwoo refused to fall victim to the same attack twice.

That was why reviewing notes for a test felt like an apt comparison.

And that's not all.

He found that he was using a specific stat to defeat each monster. For knights, strength. For assassins, it was perception. Agility for archers, and stamina against mages. If Jinwoo's stats hadn't met the base requirements to face each foe, it would have been harder to deal with them. Without enough strength, he wouldn't have made a dent in the knights' armor. If perception was too low, he would have had a tough time figuring out where the assassins were.

I'm really glad I didn't just throw everything into strength…

His intelligence stat was still a little low, but as long as he kept an eye on his mana usage, he'd manage.

[You have opened Item: Leather Pouch.]

[It contains 20,000 gold and a canteen of lukewarm water.]

[You have acquired 20,000 gold and a canteen of lukewarm water.]

Jinwoo immediately took the canteen out of inventory and gulped down the water.

“Whew…”

He could slowly feel exhaustion setting in.

How much farther do I have to go?

Was there even an end? He put the empty canteen on the ground and placed his hands on his hips. He had been in the dungeon for three hours now, and he was both mentally and physically tired.

……Should I get some rest?

Jinwoo sat down against the cave wall.

Stats.

Ping!

[Fatigue: 66]

His fatigue was nearing a dangerous level. If it went over 70, it would have a negative effect on both his body and mind. He needed to take a power nap and bring it down.

Jinwoo rested his head against the wall and quickly dozed off. He was so tired that even in this dangerous environment, he could fall fast asleep.

However…

Shwk!

A sound pierced the air! Time slowed down, and Jinwoo snatched an arrow flying toward him out of the air.

Thwp!

He opened his eyes. In the distance, an archer was reloading its bow.

Does that mean I’m not allowed to sleep yet?

Jinwoo summoned Kasaka's Venom Fang as he hauled himself to his feet.

* * *

Krnch.

The knight, now with a severely dented chestplate, slowly slid to the ground. The splayed suit of armor didn't move.

Ping!

[You have defeated a knight.]

[You have leveled up!]

Although he'd lost the full recovery benefit for now, Jinwoo continued leveling up as he battled the monsters. It was a small comfort despite his exhaustion.

Jinwoo looked at the scrape on his fist and clicked his tongue. He could heal if he rested for a time, but the damn monsters wouldn't cut him any slack.

At least he was swimming in loot now.

[ITEMS EQUIPPED]
Warden's Collar (A)

High-Rank Knight's Chestplate (B)

Mid-Rank Assassin's Boots (B)

Low-Rank Archer's Gloves (C)

High-Rank Mage's Ring (B)

Besides what he'd equipped, he stored anything else of use in his inventory.

A weapon of some kind would've been nice, though.

Assassins dropped daggers, but they had a similar attack level to Kasaka's Venom Fang and lacked the extra debuff.

What did this knight have to offer? Jinwoo reached his hand out to the light.

Ping!

[ITEM: HIGH-RANK KNIGHT'S GAUNTLETS]
Acquisition Difficulty: B

Category: Protective gear

Physical Damage Decrease: +3 percent

Additional Effect: Prevents injury to the wearer's hands

(If strength is less than 80, movement speed will decrease.)

Aha!

Jinwoo beamed as he acquired the gauntlets and wasted no time equipping them. Like the other wearable items, the gauntlets weren't in any way cumbersome, and his fingers still had full range of motion.

Excellent.

Jinwoo looked up from wiggling his fingers. All the way at the end of the path, he could finally see where the line of torches stopped, blocked off by giant castle gates.

It was rare for the boss's lair to have any kind of door. It brought to mind the underground temple dungeon from not too long ago. Back then, they hadn't known what to expect, and too many people had paid dearly. But that was then, and this was now.

He looked back in the direction from which he'd come.

It took almost six hours to get here……

He had reached level 45 and was equipped to the teeth. All his preparations were complete. As much as he wanted to rest and replenish his HP, monsters would only interrupt him if they knew he was trying to sleep. He couldn't afford to attract monsters and risk increasing his fatigue.

[HP: 4,511/8,330]

[MP: 660/790]

[Fatigue: 43]

Let's finish this.

Jinwoo checked his stats one last time and then gripped the door handles on each gate.

Creaaaaaaak!

As if rigged to some mechanism, the massive doors swung open at his touch.

2

IGRIS THE BLOODRED

2
IGRIS THE BLOODRED

Boom!

The doors to the boss's lair opened. It was dark inside, and even with Jinwoo's heightened eyesight thanks to his perception stat, it was hard to see far. He could barely make out what he was standing on.

The ground was covered in stone slates that were neatly arranged. The interlocking gray slabs made the room feel cold regardless of the actual temperature. As soon as he stepped on one…

Fwoooosh!

Countless torches on the wall flared up at once and illuminated the area.

Like I thought… It's similar to what happened in the underground temple.

Jinwoo was alert as he cautiously moved forward, taking in the room. Giant pillars stood to either side, and at the far end was a large throne.

It's just like……

A king's throne room from a movie, except the scale was exponentially larger. When Jinwoo ventured farther inside, the doors slammed shut.

Slam!

Jinwoo glanced back but wasn't surprised, as he'd been waiting for that to happen. He continued to advance.

……I'm sensing a formidable presence.

Something was telling him he had to reach the throne to complete the job-change quest, and his hunches were rarely wrong in this kind of situation. Before he could reach his destination, though, a mysterious figure emerged from behind a pillar ten paces away and blocked his path.

Thump, thump.

Thud.

The creature stopped and turned to face Jinwoo.

Gulp.

Jinwoo swallowed hard. It was clear from the name that appeared in red above its head that Jinwoo was in the presence of the boss.

[Knight Commander Igris the Bloodred]

It was a knight in a red suit of armor. The armor Igris wore was similar to the previous knights', but unlike the simpleminded lackeys, Igris seemed rather sharp. Its helmet in particular caught Jinwoo's eye. It sported a long, horselike red mane that stretched from its top and went down the back.

As he inspected the helmet, Jinwoo spotted another difference.

Are those……eyes?

He wasn't sure if he should call them eyes or pupils, but regardless, dim silver lights glowed where its eyes should've been. They felt cold and almost mechanical.

An icy gaze was fixed on Jinwoo. The hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Was this the presence I felt before……?

Defeating this knight could very well be the objective of the job-change quest, which meant he should proceed with caution. He raised his fists and took a fighting stance as he kept an eye on Igris's movements.

My dagger wouldn't work on it anyway.

Blunt force was what he needed to defeat knights.

……

Igris, who had been silently gazing at Jinwoo, suddenly removed its cloak.

Thump.

The cloak fell to the ground.

What's it doing?

The odd display didn't end there. Igris then unbelted its sword from its waist and two daggers from behind it, holding them up one by one before dropping them on the ground. It was almost like it wanted Jinwoo to be aware of what it was doing.

Clank!

Clang!

The sound of metal hitting stone echoed throughout the vast lair. Upon discarding its weapons, Igris raised its fists and took a similar fighting stance, as if mocking Jinwoo.

Jinwoo was flabbergasted.

Is it……?

Was Igris planning to engage him with its fists just because Jinwoo himself was? Jinwoo bit his bottom lip.

……It's looking down on me.

At the potential provocation, Jinwoo's face began heating up. The more intense his emotions were, the more worked up he became. As fast as his heart was pounding, his eyes were laser focused.

Bring it.

As if Igris had read Jinwoo's mind, the knight charged at him.

Tmp, tmp, tmp, tmp!

Igris moved so quickly, it was hard to believe it was wearing armor.

The armor's speed penalty only affects those with a strength stat less than 80.

Which meant that the knight's strength was at least 80! The way Igris moved, its agility also matched that of a high-rank hunter.

When it was close, Igris leaped into the air.

Tmp!

It aimed its knee at Jinwoo's face.

It's fast!

But Jinwoo was ready, pushing his reflex speed to the max. He bent backward at a nearly ninety-degree angle to avoid the attack, then straightened up.

Igris immediately made a nimble landing, unlike the other knights that had regularly fallen victim to their momentum.

Thud!

Jinwoo didn't have time to marvel at its smooth movements. He swiftly ran toward Igris before the knight could turn around and kicked at the monster's face.

Despite being unbalanced, Igris could still move its hand with precision.

Wham!

Igris easily blocked Jinwoo's right leg with its left hand.

No way!

Jinwoo was incredulous. With one of its opponent's feet out of commission, Igris slammed its fists at Jinwoo's face.

Whoosh!

Jinwoo instinctively raised his arms to guard, but doing so did nothing to lessen the impact.

Bam!

His arms flailed as his body flew into the air.

"Wha…?" Jinwoo's alarmed gasp quickly turned into a groan of pain. "……?"

Igris was already in front of him. Jinwoo didn't have time to react before Igris's left fist smashed into the side of his face.

Wham!

Jinwoo crashed into the ground, his body rebounding and rolling away for a bit. It took a moment for him to get back on his feet.

Riiiiiing…

His ears were ringing. He shook his head hard a few times, and the ringing diminished slightly. But that was the least of his worries. Jinwoo's blurry vision caught sight of Igris striding toward him.

Thump, thump!

Jinwoo forced his eyes wide open and tensed his legs. Igris came to a stop right in front of him. That was when the true pummeling began.

Igris didn’t even try to block Jinwoo’s strikes but instead weathered the punches and then delivered its own.

Bam!

Jinwoo knocked Igris’s head slightly to one side, and it swiftly returned the favor even before Jinwoo could retract his arm.

Bam!

Jinwoo’s body swayed.

Bam!

Igris was pushed back a step this time.

Bam!

A punch in the gut had Jinwoo doubling over.

“Gack!” He coughed up blood.

How is this happening……?!

He currently had a physical damage reduction of over 30 percent, but each of Igris’s punches felt like he was getting whacked around with a hammer. On the other hand, his own attacks weren’t doing much damage at all.

The battle didn’t last long.

Bam!

Jinwoo’s knees eventually buckled.

Whump.

He tried to get up, but his legs wouldn’t bear his weight.

Whump.

“Ngggh……”

Igris wordlessly loomed over him.

……?

The knight ignored Jinwoo's befuddled look and outstretched its hand toward its sword across the room, and the blade flew into its hand. The knight gripped the sword with both hands, moved to Jinwoo's side, and raised the point to the sky.

Jinwoo realized Igris's plan.

It wants to behead me.

It was really living up to the title of Knight Commander.

When Jinwoo offered no resistance, Igris proceeded with the execution. Of course, Jinwoo had absolutely no intention of going down without a fight.

The blade dropped.

Hwoosh…

And as it did, Jinwoo raised his left fist and blocked the strike.

Clang!

It was the sound of metal hitting metal! The gauntlets Jinwoo had recently acquired protected his hands.

Flinch!

Jinwoo could tell Igris had been caught off guard. He took this opportunity to deliver a punch with his right fist. As he expected, Igris didn't bother to dodge.

You're planning to return the favor again.

But the knight hadn't accounted for one thing.

Kasaka's Venom Fang!

Hwoom.

In a flash, Kasaka's Venom Fang appeared in Jinwoo's hand, and he drove it into the knight's eye.

Shunk!

Graaaaaaaaah!

The scream that followed sounded inhuman. At the same time, a beam of light shot out of the eye with the dagger in it.

Jinwoo pulled himself to his feet.

Now what?

Taking out one eye wasn't going to end this battle. He needed a finishing move.

He was then struck with an idea as he recalled a terrifying attack that had almost killed him once. He decided Igris should get a taste.

Jinwoo was already on the move before he realized it. He lowered his stance and wrapped his arms around Igris's waist. Then he started running.

Graaaaah!

Igris struck Jinwoo's back several times, and the hunter struggled from the pain. Jinwoo gritted his teeth and held on tight. Rather, he sped up.

"Dash!"

[Your speed has increased by 40 percent.]

Jinwoo's legs went faster, and his whole body shook at the velocity.

Yes, just like this…

He would crush Igris! Keeping a firm grip on his opponent, he hurtled toward a wall. Of course, the impact would also have devastating consequences for him, but he had one more passive skill up his sleeve.

The gap closed in a blink of an eye, and the wall was right there.

BOOM!

Igris crashed into the wall.

As it did, a notification displayed.

Ping!

[Skill: Willpower has been activated, as your HP is below 30 percent.]

[Your damage will decrease by 50 percent.]

The force of the impact was so great, the entire lair quaked briefly.

“Ugh.”

Jinwoo stumbled back. Igris was embedded in the wall but still alive. The fire of life continued burning inside it.

I need to end this……

Jinwoo pulled Kasaka’s Venom Fang out of Igris’s eye, and its body twitched. Jinwoo got a good grip and struck at the knight’s throat.

Fatal Strike!

Clang!

The attack glanced off.

Again.

Fatal Strike!

Clang!

Sparks flew. There were now scratches on the metal plate protecting its neck.

Again.

Fatal Strike!

Clang!

Again.

Clang!

Again.

Clang!

And finally.

Fatal Strike!

Shunk!

Kasaka's Venom Fang sank deep into its throat.

[You have defeated Knight Commander Igris the Bloodred.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo raised his arms in victory. He withdrew a couple of steps and then dropped to the ground on his hands and knees as his legs gave way.

"Huff, huff."

He released the breath he had been holding. He'd barely won. It had been extremely close.

But is the quest not over……?

Jinwoo took his time catching his breath, then heaved himself up. He thought killing this creature would be the end of the quest, but the system was silent. Looking around, he noticed that nothing had changed.

Well, one thing was different. Several lights were emanating from Igris's prone form. There were items to collect.

Let's take care of this first.

He had no idea what might happen next, after all. Picking up as many items as he could whenever he could would be the best call. Jinwoo reached out his hand.

[You have discovered Item: Crimson Knight's Helmet. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Rune Stone: Ruler's Hand. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Item: Leather Pouch. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Item: Instant Teleportation Stone. Would you like to acquire it?]

There was a startling number of items, which puzzled Jinwoo, but it also delighted him.

Acquire all.

The leather pouch was the first to be processed.

[You have opened Item: Leather Pouch.]

[It contains 1,500,000 gold.]

[You have acquired 1,500,000 gold.]

Jinwoo's eyes went huge.

These rewards are on a completely different level!

It had been a hard-fought battle, but the rewards made it worthwhile. He hadn't been expecting much from the leather pouch, let alone 1,500,000 gold. He could now afford plenty of worthwhile items from the shop.

But Jinwoo's attention was on something else. If an item he didn't expect much from was this good, how valuable would the helmet or rune stone be? He tried to lower his expectations as he brought up the helmet's info.

Ping!

[ITEM: CRIMSON KNIGHT'S HELMET]

Acquisition Difficulty: S

Category: Protective gear

Physical Damage Decrease: +15 percent

Stamina +20, Strength +20

"S rank!" Jinwoo whooped.

This was his first S-rank item. A 15 percent physical damage decrease would've been good enough, but it would also raise his strength and stamina stats by twenty points. His heart fluttered just looking at the screen.

A-rank items can't even compare!

He had acquired a couple of A-rank items by this point. The first was Kasaka's Venom Gland from the snakelike kasaka, and the second was the Warden's Collar from the hellhound Cerberus.

These two items had been fantastic in their own right. Despite the strength penalty, the venom gland had decreased any physical damage taken by 20 percent.

And the Warden's Collar? As an item that increased his agility and perception by twenty points each, the collar was one of the best items available.

But this new Crimson Knight's Helmet offered a boost similar to both those items combined without a stat penalty.

It really is the best.

Jinwoo was aware he was standing in the middle of a boss lair, but he couldn't stop smiling.

That he genuinely liked its design was the cherry on top.

Too bad it'll be invisible.

The bloodred helmet with the long flowing mane was like a work of art. For a brief moment, he thought about trying on the full set of armor if he could.

However…

What could've been…?

Not all parts of Igris's armor were glowing, so he wasn't permitted to acquire them. The only protective gear that was his for the taking was the helmet. He pushed aside his wishful thinking and carefully pulled on the helmet.

Hwoom.

As usual, the helmet disappeared instantly. Although he wouldn't be able to show it off, the helmet blew up his stats.

[Stats]

Strength: 128(+20)

Stamina: 87(+20)

Agility: 107

Intelligence: 66

Perception: 89

Physical damage reduced by: 46 percent (+15 percent)

The numbers in the brackets represented the stat increases that came from wearing the helmet. His strength, stamina, and physical damage debuffs had all jumped significantly.

He couldn’t be more satisfied. His heart raced as he took in the stat changes.

Wait, no.

He frowned.

The quest isn’t over, so let’s not get too excited just yet.

Besides, he had more items to check out. His gaze shifted to the other two items in anticipation.

[Rune Stone: Ruler’s Hand]

[Item: Instant Teleportation Stone]

Of the two walnut-size stones, the Instant Teleportation Stone grabbed his attention first.

I know what rune stones are, but…

What was an Instant Teleportation Stone? His curiosity was sated when the information screen came up.

Ping!

[ITEM: INSTANT TELEPORTATION STONE]
Rank: ??

Category: Consumable

This item can be obtained only from a job-change quest.

Crush the stone to be instantly teleported outside the dungeon. If unused, it will automatically be destroyed once the job-change quest ends.

Cannot be stored in the inventory.

Its activation method was identical to that of a rune stone, except it was for escaping from the dungeon instead of learning a new skill.

Wait, the job-change quest isn't over yet?

If it had been, the stone would've crumbled by now as per the description. Since it was still intact, that could only mean……

Jinwoo felt a chill creep up his spine.

It was strange. He had just obtained one of the top items that would help him escape the dungeon, yet at that moment, he had an ominous feeling.

If this stone could be used in regular dungeons outside the system, all hunters would be scrambling to get their hands on one. This small rock was worth one's life, so what price tag wouldn't they pay?

And Jinwoo was no different. The stone took some of the pressure off this quest.

If I need to……

He could leave the dungeon at any time. However, he couldn't escape the uneasy feeling in the back of his mind.

And like he'd thought…

The system sounded an alarm, as if it had been waiting for this very moment.

Ping!

[The Player has acquired the Instant Teleportation Stone.]

[The job-change quest begins now.]

What the hell?! This item triggered the start *of the quest?!*

Jinwoo felt faint, like he'd just realized he'd stepped on a land mine.

If I'd known this would happen, I would've rested a little more.

It was too late for regrets. No matter how experienced or knowledgeable one was, the future was impossible to predict accurately.

Jinwoo broke out in a cold sweat. He mentally called up the stat window and checked his HP and fatigue.

[HP: 4,161/10,270]

[MP: 390/850]

[Fatigue: 61]

Fatigue is a little high, but this is still doable.

The helmet's stamina buff had also raised both his total and remaining HP, so there was that at least.

Jinwoo encouraged himself.

I can still do this.

His life wouldn't really be in danger, since he held the Instant Teleportation Stone in his hand. However, he couldn't shake the notion that the stone symbolized surrender. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been used to trigger the start of the quest.

If I give up on the quest……

He would be giving up the chance to change his job.

Sweat dripped down his forehead and fell to the floor. He licked his dry lips when the next message arrived.

Ping!

[Dimensional gates will be randomly generated in 10 seconds.]

Dimensional gates?

Instead of an answer, large numbers appeared in midair.

[00:00:10]

It was obviously a countdown.

More messages followed.

[The Player has a choice.]

[The Player can either leave the dungeon using the Instant Teleportation Stone…]

……Eight, seven, six.

The countdown went on.

[…or survive as long as possible, gathering as many advancement points as possible, and get promoted to a higher class.]

“Survive? Survive what?” Jinwoo exploded in frustration.

Despite this, he had already switched out the rune stone for Kasaka’s Venom Fang in his inventory and placed the Instant Teleportation Stone in his back pocket.

He was a mess, but he was ready for battle. This was who he was.

[The job-change quest will commence shortly.]

……Four, three, two.

Jinwoo anxiously glared at the timer and then scanned the area, his head turning every which way. Something was happening. The space around him was beginning to warp and distort.

[00:00:01]

[Good luck.]

That was odd. It was the first time the system had expressed any emotion. But there was no time to be surprised.

Once the countdown hit zero, gates began forming all around the room.

Vwoom…

Vwoom…

It wasn't just one or two. There were six or so in his general area and even more scattered throughout the room.

The timer simultaneously started counting up.

[00:00:02]

The clock was ticking, and the amount of time elapsed would be converted into advancement points. Jinwoo didn't fully understand what the system had said, but he got the gist.

The longer I endure, the stronger I'll get.

To be exact, he'd get a better job. He couldn't let this opportunity go to waste. He had plenty of both HP and MP left.

I'll give it my all.

[00:00:03]

With precisely three seconds on the clock, a countless number of weaponless knights poured out of the gates near him.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

The ground trembled from the sea of silver knights. Their numbers could've overwhelmed Jinwoo, but he had a smile on his face.

I can easily take these guys!

He was kind of thankful that these knights were his opponents. Had they been monsters at Igris's level, he would've barely lasted a few seconds.

First, let's get out of their sight with Stealth.

He decided to use some of his precious mana.

Hwoom.

He began fading from view. As predicted, the charging knights all stopped in their tracks.

However…

[A mage has used Skill: Eyes of Detection.]

The system sounded an alerting chime. Jinwoo spun around to pinpoint the noise.

What?

A mage had emerged from a gate and was casting a spell. Jinwoo caught sight of an eye-shaped symbol floating above its head. As he did, the symbol flashed, and Jinwoo's Stealth was deactivated in an instant.

Shit!

Things were already going downhill.

Fwip.

Fwip.

The knights, standing at attention like telephone poles, all turned their heads toward Jinwoo at the same time. It was like a scene straight out of a horror movie. The silver wave headed his way.

Jinwoo braced himself.

Bam!

He punched the head off one of the knights coming at him, and it stopped in its tracks.

[You have defeated a knight.]

Jinwoo's eyes gleamed.

Murderous Intent!

[Skill: Murderous Intent has been activated.]

[Debuff: Panic has been activated.]

[All the opponent's abilities will decrease by 50 percent for 1 minute.]

The debuff caused a lot of the monsters to slow down, but Jinwoo's MP was now at 90. Murderous Intent required 100 mana, so he wouldn't be able to use it again.

But I bought myself a minute.

Jinwoo set about striking down as many monsters as he could in the span of a minute while they were in this weakened state.

Bam!

Crack!

Bam!

Krrrk!

He crushed his enemies at an incredible speed.

Bam! Bam! Crack!

But knights were emerging from the gate faster than he could take them down.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

Jinwoo checked the time amid the chaos.

[00:03:19]

Three minutes and nineteen seconds. How many points did that add up to? Could he leave yet? There was no time to stop and calculate things. Knights continued pouring out of the gates nonstop. Though he had disposed of so many already, it was simply impossible to make out the number of knights now swarming the room.

“Aaargh!”

Eventually, Jinwoo started drowning in the sea of knights.

[Skill: Willpower has been activated.]

[Skill: Willpower has been activated.]

His HP took a nosedive and was almost at rock bottom.

[HP: 1,036/10,270]

How much time…?

[00:05:08]

Five minutes and eight seconds. He’d lasted as long as he could.

……Let’s get out of here.

Trapped in a suffocating cage of silver, Jinwoo struggled to reach his back pocket while surrounded by all that armor. However…

Tink!

The Instant Teleportation Stone slipped from his hand. It bounced off a knight’s heel and rolled away.

“Nooo!”

Jinwoo desperately reached for the stone, but his hand was blocked by knights. More of them soon started piling on top of him. He was suffocating and found it hard to breathe.

[Skill: Willpower has been activated.]

[Skill: Willpower has been activated.]

He was starting to lose consciousness.

Bam! Bam!

As he began to fade, incessantly struck by knights, he thought he heard someone snickering at him.

“This is all your fault, isn’t it?”

……

“Why did you choose to stray off the beaten path? Wasn’t it miraculous enough for an E-rank hunter to rise to C or even B rank?”

……

“That’s all you were capable of in the end.”

……Shut up.

“You’ve only got yourself to blame.”

Shut up!

Wham!

The knights swarming around Jinwoo were blown away. Even though Jinwoo was near death, there was life in his eyes. His gaze was brimming with malice.

It can’t end like this.

He’d endured so much for this one opportunity. Having been on the bottommost rung his whole life, he’d craved a seat at the top of society. More than anyone, he knew the sorrows of the weak. Even though he had scratched and clawed his way through life just to survive, all it had gotten him were laughs and jeers.

“What use is an E rank?”

“What’s the association thinking? They should send someone capable, not… Ugh…”

“I bet he just cowered behind other hunters.”

He’d been handed a ladder to climb up to the place he’d gazed at longingly for so long, so how could he be expected to just sit back and stare? Hell no.

……I remember now.

He remembered the voices that had just been echoing in his head. It was their voices, the voices of everyone who had ridiculed him behind his back.

Well, they could scoff all they wanted. He’d keep struggling with every breath left in him. It didn’t matter if he had 10 HP left or even just 1. He would keep going to the bitter end. He’d fight until he couldn’t fight anymore.

“Ahhhh!”

Jinwoo launched himself into the fray.

Whack!

He threw a punch and dented a knight’s chestplate, sending it flying backward and taking down the ones behind it as well.

The knights started charging at him once again. Jinwoo fought back even harder.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

It didn’t matter if they met Jinwoo’s fist, elbow, knee, or foot—every enemy that came in contact with him crumpled like a paper doll.

[Your fatigue is over 70.]

[Your movement will be limited.]

Jinwoo slowed as warned, but the malice in his eyes still shone brightly.

Knights that didn't go down after one or two hits would rejoin the brawl, and he would strike them three or four more times to make sure they stayed down.

Crack!

[……8, 7, 6, 5…]

Meanwhile, another countdown had started. Absorbed in the battle, Jinwoo didn't notice it until the countdown had reach single digits.

What? Is the quest going to be over?

For a moment, he had hopes, but they were quickly dashed.

[00:06:27]

The timer was still going, so the countdown didn't seem to be related.

[4, 3, 2…]

Is this a countdown to my death?

Something like that had happened before, right when all this started. The system had told him he would die in two-hundredths of a second if he didn't become a Player.

So if that was the case… Jinwoo glared fiercely.

I'll make it count until the last second.

Bam! Crash!

Two more knights went down.

However, despite Jinwoo's determination, his body was a mess. He could barely keep his posture. He had trouble lifting his arms to block the knights' blows.

One came at him from the front, another from the rear.

Boom!

Jinwoo groaned as they smashed into him from either side.

"Argh!"

Other knights pressed in from every angle as if they didn't want to miss a single opportunity. Besieged, Jinwoo couldn't move a finger.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

The knights continued piling on, and the silver wave became a silver mountain.

Jinwoo's breathing grew labored.

"Huff, huff…!"

It felt like he was about to suffocate to death. Jinwoo's hand, which protruded through a gap in the crush of knights, uselessly reached to the sky.

[HP: 93/10,270]

It was futile, but still, Jinwoo didn't give up.

Not yet. I can still……

As the hand reaching toward the heavens clenched into a fist, the mysterious countdown announced its result.

[……1, 0]

[You have not completed the daily quest.]

[You will be transferred to the penalty zone.]

3

QUEST RESULTS

3
QUEST RESULTS

Jinwoo was convinced he'd misheard something.

……Penalty zone?

That's when it hit him. He hadn't done the daily quest. He had decided not to in order to test his abilities before tackling the Demon's Castle dungeon.

To think things would turn out like this.

Rrrrrumble…

There was a trembling all around, just like what had happened in the hospital.

Fssssh.

Fssssh.

The knights encompassing Jinwoo disintegrated one by one into sand. The world was transforming.

Ha-ha……ha……

The absurdity of it all made Jinwoo chuckle bemusedly. For some reason, the system message he'd received before the quest began kept replaying in his head.

[Good luck.]

Did it mean that the quest was so difficult that he'd need luck on his side? Or was the system encouraging him to get as high a score as he could, even if it meant relying on luck?

Call it luck or coincidence, but either way, it was an opportunity. The important thing was how to take advantage of it.

Rrrrumble…

The quakes grew stronger. Jinwoo closed his eyes and allowed them to rock him around instead of trying to struggle to find his balance.

Don't let it get to you……

Everything went silent, and he felt like his body was floating on air.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in the heart of a desert. He dropped to his knees where he stood.

"Haaaah, huff, huff." He dug his fingers into the sand and let out a shaky breath. Fresh air entered his lungs and circulated through his body.

Finally…

"I can breathe."

Swaddled by a sense of relief, Jinwoo flopped onto his back. Above him was an empty black sky. He took in the endless inky void. It looked just like the penalty zone he remembered.

Wait, I don't have time for this.

Having just escaped an extremely dangerous situation, he had forgotten that this was no safe zone, either. Still, Jinwoo didn't feel like getting up, so he called up the stat window as he was.

[HP: 93/10,270]

[MP: 202/850]

[Fatigue: 91]

No wonder he felt so drained. His fatigue was over 90.

This is the first time it's ever gone over 90, isn't it?

He was reluctant to lift even a finger. HP was a problem, too, but his priority was lowering his fatigue.

"Shop."

Ping!

The words *Buy* and *Sell* materialized in midair. Jinwoo had always thought the interface was rather too simplistic, like not much thought had been put into the design, but he now welcomed the sight.

He bought the most expensive healing potion available. Once he finalized the purchase…

Hwoom.

A glass bottle containing bright-red liquid appeared in his open hand.

Pop.

Jinwoo pulled out the stopper and poured the potion into his mouth.

Gulp, gulp.

The red liquid slid down his throat and into his body.

[Recovering fatigue.]

[Recovering fatigue.]

[Recovering fatigue.]

Perhaps because it was the most expensive healing potion, he could visibly see his level of fatigue drop. Oddly enough, however, there was no change in his HP.

[HP: 93/10,270]

[MP: 204/850]

[Fatigue: 0]

His HP remained the same even as he finished drinking the potion, which was a direct contrast to his fatigue, which was now at 0.

Why is that?

Jinwoo received an answer after he shook the last drop of potion into his mouth.

Ping!

[Healing potions cannot recover HP when it dips below 10 percent of your total HP.]

Simple enough. It was because his HP was too low.

Makes sense……

Healing magic also had limitations, so this concept was nothing new. Just as a healer's level determined their healing ability, the potions could not treat anything outside their restrictions.

There's a limit to what healing potions can do.

Good to know. If he were to rely too heavily on potions without knowing this, it could have really bitten him in the ass one day.

This was why firsthand experience was crucial. How did it go again? What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's why experience was everything. Luckily, Jinwoo had already survived the penalty zone once before.

It's about time……

Right on cue, Jinwoo sensed the presence of some kind of life-form squirming underneath him.

He tucked his legs in and sprang to his feet. His body was light as a feather. The potion had filled him with energy.

Tmp.

Jinwoo stuck the landing and looked back.

Fsssshhh…

As he predicted, the spot where he'd been lying was now a sinkhole.

I used to think I'd die if I fell down one of those.

Now he stood at ease, watching the hole curiously. The bottom of the pit started bubbling.

Fffssshhhhh!

A pillar of sand shot up, and a tremendous centipede emerged.

Grrraaahhh!

It was exactly as he remembered.

I was terrified when I first saw one of these……

This time, it was like he was watching a video in slow motion. Jinwoo looked to the space above its head. There, he could clearly make out the red letters.

[Poison-Toothed Giant Desert Centipede]

Its name was in red, the same color as Cerberus at the Demon's Castle.

Just then, he received the quest message.

Ping!

[PENALTY QUEST: SURVIVAL]

Objective: Survive the required time.

Required time: 4 hours

Remaining time: 04:00:00

Jinwoo was pumped when he read the message.

I've bought some time with this.

He still had a chance, since he hadn't used the Instant Teleportation Stone to escape.

I'll probably be transported back to there as soon as I finish this penalty quest.

And if the system counted the time he spent in the penalty zone in the overall time endured… He'd earn a huge amount of advancement points. He couldn't be sure if that was how it would work.

But……

If he thought about how the system was geared to benefit him, he was certain that there'd be a positive outcome from all this.

Four whole hours!

He had been forced to reach for the Instant Teleportation Stone in under ten minutes, yet he'd somehow gained four hours for free just because of the penalty zone.

There was only one problem. Could he get out of this place safely with only 100 or so HP? Since it wasn't possible to recover his health with potions, he had to defeat the centipedes with as little damage to himself as possible until he leveled up.

He now had a goal to strive for.

……Let's do this.

Jinwoo equipped Kasaka's Venom Fang.

[Remaining time: 03:59:59]

As soon as the penalty quest began, Jinwoo rushed forward even before the centipede had a chance to make a move. Closing the gap between them in a split second, Jinwoo jumped at the creature.

Tmp!

With one strong leap, he landed on a leg about halfway up the length of its body and proceeded to hack at the creature while climbing it.

Shhhk! Shunk! Shhhk!

Each stab from Kasaka's Venom Fang left a cut that leaked fluids.

Skreeeee!

The centipede screeched and thrashed about with every slash, like it was in pain.

Dash!

Jinwoo's speed shot up.

Tmp, tmp, tmp, tmp!

The hunter made his way to the top of the creature in a flash, where he gripped his dagger with both hands and prepared to strike.

And…

Fatal Strike!

With the skill activated, he stabbed the centipede with all his might. The blade penetrated the centipede's head.

Krrrk!

[The level of Skill: Fatal Strike has increased!]

Yeah!

It'd been a while since he'd heard good news of any kind.

The damage from the leveled-up Fatal Strike seemed to be substantial as the centipede violently flailed.

Skreeeeee, skreeee!

But Jinwoo didn't stop there. He maneuvered his way to its back, where it was wide open and defenseless.

Shunk!

He drove in his dagger, tightened his grip on the handle, then slid down the centipede's back.

Shhhhhhhnnnk!

A strength of over 120 coupled with a fall from the height of a five-story building carved the centipede's back open spectacularly.

Shhhhhnk!

Tmp.

Jinwoo landed safely.

Skreeee, skreeeeeeee!

Fluids exploded in a geyser as the centipede convulsed and crashed into the ground.

Whump!

The impact kicked up sand everywhere.

Ping!

[You have defeated Poison-Toothed Giant Desert Centipede.]

Jinwoo fanned away the dust to check the remaining time.

[Remaining time: 03:59:42]

That took me seventeen seconds.

It took less than twenty seconds to kill a giant centipede. It was a huge difference from how his battle against Cerberus had gone. Jinwoo's current power was on a completely different level.

Considering how many times I leveled up since then… Not to mention all the items I'm wearing…

It made perfect sense. He was positive he could finish off the centipedes without losing any HP.

The problem is, are there enough of them to kill so I can level up?

That was the key to succeeding at the job-change quest. The only thing awaiting him if he couldn't recover his HP would be certain death.

Just then, more columns of sand shot into the sky.

Fffssshhhhh!

Fffssshhh!

Having smelled the blood of their kind, a number of centipedes were now converging on the area.

Grrraaahhh!

Grrraaahhh!

Jinwoo's expression brightened.

How many of them are there exactly?

Seeing all their heads poking out of the sand, Jinwoo couldn't keep the grin off his face.

* * *

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Four hours later, after battling all those centipedes, Jinwoo had leveled up four more times and was now at level 51. The penalty quest was at its end.

[PENALTY QUEST: SURVIVAL]
Objective: Survive the required time.

Required time: 4 hours

Remaining time: 00:03:19

It was almost time to return. Jinwoo took in the sight around him. The corpses of centipedes littered the desert. Thanks to their sacrifice, he had been able to recover his HP.

Too bad there weren't any item or gold drops……

Although that would have defeated the point of the penalty zone.

In any case, it was time to get ready.

Shop.

[Balance: 3,115,629 gold]

Humanoid monsters often dropped bags of gold, and he'd earned an additional 1,500,000 gold from Igris, so he had lots to spare.

Jinwoo spent most of it on a single weapon. He'd spotted something that was just what he needed.

[ITEM: KNIGHT KILLER]
Acquisition Difficulty: B

Category: Dagger

Attack Power +75

A sharp and sturdy dagger designed to penetrate armor. The blade has a sawtooth design to prevent it from glancing off armor.

Buff: Kill the Knights: Damage output increases by 25 percent when facing armored opponents.

It was a weapon made for battling armored adversaries and cost 2,800,000 gold. It would mean spending the majority of his savings, but there was no reason to nitpick about the price.

Gold doesn't mean anything if I'm dead.

He made the purchase without thinking twice.

[You have purchased Knight Killer.]

[You have purchased bandages.]

Jinwoo also bought some bandages. He gripped Knight Killer with its scary-looking sawtooth blade in his right hand and wrapped them together tightly with the bandage.

Swish, fwish.

Knight Killer felt like an extension of his hand as he took some practice swings.

At least I won't drop it.

For a second, he considered securing Kasaka's Venom Fang to his left hand but ultimately decided against it. It would've been too awkward having both hands bound. He decided that it would be better to have one free.

As he put the remaining bandages into his inventory, Jinwoo spotted the rune stone he had acquired from Igris.

Oh yeah, I forgot I had this.

[RUNE STONE: RULER'S HAND]
You may obtain the skill by crushing the stone.

Jinwoo needed whatever help he could get, whether it was an item or a skill. Without further ado, Jinwoo crushed the rune stone.

[You learned Skill: Ruler's Hand.]

[SKILL: RULER'S HAND, LV.1]
Active skill.

No mana required.

The user can physically manipulate objects without touching them.

Oh…!

The description brought to mind the moment when Igris had stretched out its hand toward its sword across the room.

So that's how it moved the sword.

A skill that would allow him to move objects with a single thought! And it didn't require any mana, either.

If this skill can really move around anything, it'll be a game changer.

Jinwoo tested the skill on a nearby centipede corpse.

[Object cannot be moved due to low proficiency.]

[Object cannot be moved due to low proficiency.]

It appeared as though Jinwoo needed to level up the skill before he could move heavier objects.

Then how about this?

Jinwoo dropped Kasaka's Venom Fang at his feet, then held out his palm. The dagger shot into his hand.

Tak!

Wow.

He snatched the blade's hilt and looked at it with wonder.

This'll be a big help.

With that, he was ready to go. When he raised his head, time was almost up.

[Remaining time: 00:00:04]

At three seconds remaining, there was a message from the system.

Ping!

[The penalty quest will terminate shortly.]

And another message followed.

Ping!

[As you have attempted to hunt in the penalty zone, the difficulty of the next penalty zone will be upgraded accordingly.]

The adjustment was most likely to make hunting harder so it would feel like an actual punishment.

But will there be a next time?

Jinwoo took a deep breath.

Now back to the job-change quest.

There had to be several hundred monsters awaiting him in the boss's lair. Their numbers might have increased. To put it nicely, he was being transferred back to the dungeon, but the reality was more like he was being thrown to the wolves.

HP, mana, fatigue, items, skills, and determination. Currently, he was in a much better position than when he'd first set foot inside the job-change dungeon, but he still couldn't help feeling anxious.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump.

His heart beat so hard, it almost hurt. He closed his eyes, trying to keep his cool.

Finally, the chime sounded.

Ping!

[You have completed the penalty quest.]

This is my last chance……

Jinwoo opened his eyes again…

…and was met with the sight of all the silver knights simultaneously slowly turning in his direction. However, they were not his priority. His eyes sharpened in focus as he scanned the area.

Gotta start with the mages!

His reasoning for this was simple.

If I'm right……

He hoped to confirm a theory he'd come up with in the penalty zone.

Thud, thud, thud, thud!

Knights charged at him aggressively, but Jinwoo calmly stepped onto the shoulders of the knight in the forefront and launched himself into the air. From that vantage point, he could see the whole room.

Where are they?

……There! He spotted a mage not too far from him.

I knew it!

He had been correct about what he had witnessed earlier. He wasn't just seeing things. When Jinwoo had reached his hand out through the horde of knights, he'd seen something through a small gap that hadn't made sense at the time.

……

A mage was casting spells without pause. There was nothing out of the ordinary about a mage using magic, but Jinwoo was convinced that something was off.

If you think about it……

Where was the magic? Only the knights were directly attacking Jinwoo. He could hear the mages chanting, but none of it resulted in a show of actual power…with one exception. When one of them negated his Stealth skill with Eyes of Detection, the knights around him had paused momentarily.

Initially, Jinwoo had assumed the knights had frozen because their target had disappeared, but he'd had the belated realization while hunting centipedes in the penalty zone. Around the time he'd killed the eighth centipede, he'd pumped his fists in celebration when the standard level-up message appeared.

[You have leveled up!]

His HP had recovered fully. But his happiness was cut short when he had sensed something wasn't right.

It's easy to level up here, so why couldn't I level up over there?

The system had warned him about the loss of HP recovery when leveling up but hadn't said anything about not being able to level up at all. Thinking back, he was able to level up five times before the start of the job-change quest, but he hadn't leveled up once afterward despite lasting six minutes and defeating close to a hundred knights.

Mages that weren't casting spells and knights that didn't award experience points. As soon as Jinwoo put these two together, a new possibility formed in his head.

Maybe……

The knights in the lair were fake. The reason they stopped moving wasn't that Jinwoo had vanished but rather because the mage controlling them had to temporarily stop casting to use Eyes of Detection.

And if I'm right…!

He was about to test his theory. He dodged the knights who tried to grab him and made a beeline for the mage by jumping off their heads and shoulders.

……!

Jinwoo sensed the mage was starting to panic. Its chanting quickened. The knights suddenly went from solely attacking to gathering around the mage to protect it. The possibility was becoming a surety.

Tmp!

He landed in front of the mage. Without a moment's hesitation, he stabbed it in the heart with his dagger.

Fatal Strike!

Shunk!

The mage soundlessly vanished in a puff of black smoke.

[You have defeated a mage.]

And at the same time…

Clunk, cla-clunk…

Like marionettes with cut strings, the horde of knights previously attacking Jinwoo collapsed to the ground. They were nothing but suits of armor scattered on the floor.

I was right!

Jinwoo cheered in his mind. After coming close to death multiple times, he had finally figured it out. The knights weren't the real threat. The mages controlling them were the true targets.

The first thing I actually killed with the Knight Killer was a mage…

Jinwoo chuckled at the irony as he gazed at the abandoned robes on the floor.

He'd found his stride again, but there was no time to relish in his victory. The quest wasn't over yet.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

The ground quaked, and Jinwoo turned to see countless knights were already swarming around him. That meant there were more mages hidden somewhere, controlling these puppets.

Knights leaped at him. Jinwoo's right hand moved so fast, it was almost invisible.

Shwack!

The first row was sliced in half. Jinwoo blinked in astonishment.

Whoa!

It was 2,800,000 gold well spent. Knight Killer cut through the armor like it was paper. It wasn't merely because of the sawtooth blade. As described, Knight Killer was made for battling armored adversaries, and Jinwoo could sense magic emanating from the dagger.

Who knew the shop weapons were this good?

It was quite different from public opinion, which was that store-bought weapons were a last resort, something to turn to only when there was no other alternative.

I guess that makes gold even more valuable now, doesn't it?

At the very least, they were better than standard hunter-issue weapons. He might also be able to make a lot of money by buying weapons from the shop and reselling them to other hunters. Unlike consumable items, there was no rule that forbade him from transferring a weapon to another person.

Focus. I need to focus.

This was no time to get distracted. Knights continued converging on Jinwoo.

Shwick! Shhhk!

He cut them down in groups while avoiding their attacks, but it was clear.

This is futile.

He'd reduce their numbers only to look in another direction and see even more closing in.

Shhhk!

He beheaded another one.

I need to find the mage.

Before the headless knight hit the ground, Jinwoo hopped onto its shoulders and launched himself up.

Stealth!

Hwoom.

Jinwoo faded from sight. Of course, his aim wasn't to hide but rather…

[A mage has used Skill: Eyes of Detection.]

[A mage has used Skill: Eyes of Detection.]

[A mage has used Skill: Eyes of Detection.]

Ping, ping!

A high-pitched alarm chimed from all directions. He bounded from one knight's head to the next to pinpoint the telltale eye symbols.

There are five mages in all.

He targeted the one closest to him.

……!

As soon as Jinwoo looked its way, the mage hurriedly commanded knights to protect it, but…

Hwoosh!

Kasaka's Venom Fang flew out of Jinwoo's left hand and straight into the center of the mage's forehead.

Krrrk!

[You learned Skill: Dagger Throw.]

[You have defeated a mage.]

Ca-clang…

Hundreds more knights collapsed.

Four left.

Leaping off one knight's head to another, Jinwoo swiftly made his way to his next target.

Wait. He looked back at Kasaka's Venom Fang, which he hadn't retrieved. It was time to use his new skill.

Ruler's Hand.

When Jinwoo reached out toward Kasaka's Venom Fang, the dagger flew back like a magnet.

Yes!

He snatched the blade out of the air. Not needing to retreat to retrieve his weapon meant he could move more efficiently. In a flash, he reached the next mage.

……!

Before it could react, Jinwoo slashed at it.

[You have defeated a mage.]

More knights fell, and now less than half their numbers remained. Victory was close at hand. The glare in Jinwoo's eyes intensified.

Three to go.

Feeling threatened, the mages gathered in one spot, and the knights congregated together as well. The mages then began chanting in unison. Their creepy voices rang through the room as their spell was cast.

Krrrrk, krrrrk…

The knights guarding the mages suddenly crumpled as if they were under an invisible industrial hydraulic press. They re-formed into one gigantic steel golem that immediately set its sights on Jinwoo.

Gwooooooh…

Are you kidding me?

Jinwoo was genuinely amazed by the pressure coming from the monster, but he wasn't afraid of it. He had flirted with death so many times before that he felt more animated than nervous.

STOMP, STOMP, STOMP!

The ground shook with each step the golem took. It was a force to be reckoned with.

Hwoosh.

Jinwoo readily ducked to avoid the monster's punch.

Boom!

The metal fist grazed the stone pillar behind him, breaking it in half.

I mean, it's pretty terrifying, but……

Jinwoo smirked. If he hadn't figured out what was going on here, he would've struggled against the giant. As it was, though, he had nothing to worry about.

Gwoooooh!

As the golem prepared to smash down at him with both hands, Jinwoo charged toward it using the Dash skill instead of retreating. He then slid through the golem's legs and came out behind it in an instant. While the golem hurried to turn, Jinwoo stepped in front of the now-defenseless mages.

……!

……!

The startled mages trembled.

Checkmate!

Jinwoo wore a contented smile. The phrase "united we stand but divided we fall" had backfired in this case, as the mages were now easier to defeat because they were all huddled together.

Jinwoo swung both daggers.

[You have defeated a mage.]

[You have defeated a mage.]

[You have defeated a mage.]

The three mages became black smoke just as the others had. The golem, which had been grasping at Jinwoo in vain, disintegrated into sand and scattered.

But Jinwoo kept his guard up.

Is it over? Or are there more?

Just in case, he braced himself until he heard the sound of a notification.

Ping!

Jinwoo held his breath. Contrary to his fears, though, the system announced the end of the quest.

[The job-change quest has concluded, as all the monsters in the trial room have been defeated.]

[Your job will be assigned shortly.]

[Depending on the advancement points acquired, you may progress to a higher class.]

Only then was Jinwoo able to let out his breath in relief. “Whew.”

It had been a difficult battle. If he’d been preoccupied with the Instant Teleportation Stone, he wouldn’t have figured out how to defeat these monsters.

I probably would’ve been figuring out when to bail.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, he had lost the Instant Teleportation Stone, and that had forced him to concentrate on the battle. The end result was an unequivocal success. His efforts would now be compensated.

Jinwoo looked at the timer.

[04:29:16]

The timer was frozen. He had survived four and a half hours in the dungeon. But that wasn't all. It was a quest he could've cleared simply by enduring, but he'd forcefully ended the quest by killing all the monsters. He started getting anxious about how many points he had earned and what job he'd be able to choose based on those points.

[An appropriate job will be assigned after analyzing your actions.]

Sounds good.

If his job was decided by how he'd responded, then the odds of him ending up with a class that would only bring him trouble would be negated. He was thankful for that.

[Wherever the Player goes, the angel of death follows. Whatever path the Player takes, it is littered with corpses and the stench of blood remains.]

……

The words were a little harsh, but he couldn't exactly refute them.

It was all to level up, but……

He'd repeatedly killed monsters until he couldn't level up anymore in instance dungeons, and he'd hunted down every single tiny magic beast hiding in regular dungeons. And even though it had never been his intention, there had been a few times he'd fought other hunters.

"The angel of death," "corpses," "the stench of blood…"

No matter how you look at it……

It sounded like he was destined to be an assassin class.

[In addition, the Player craves great power and blazes his own trail without relying on others.]

Jinwoo nodded. Overall, he agreed with the system's evaluation.

I never had any colleagues to rely on in the beginning.

However, he didn't understand why all this was being included in an analysis for a job change.

The system continued its evaluation.

[Because your desire for power is strong enough to summon lost souls back from death's embrace, an army of the undead that answers only to you will clear you a path without the help of others.]

……"An army of the undead"?

Jinwoo was starting to think that things weren't going the way he'd planned.

"Wait!"

Before he could protest, the system announced his results in its usual unconcerned tone.

[Your job is necromancer.]

"……Huh?!"

Jinwoo was floored. Everything had been pointing toward assassin, so where did necromancer come from? Jinwoo stared blankly at the screen. He rubbed his eyes, but nothing changed.

[Your job is necromancer.]

The message was the same. After the denial came the anger.

I've never bothered with the intelligence stat, so why the hell…?!

Of all the different mage-class hunters out there, why was he assigned the rarest of the rare jobs? Ever since first awakening as an E-rank hunter, Jinwoo had always been a brawler. With the

exception of the steel sword, he'd exclusively used daggers, and all the skills he'd earned up to now made him perfectly suited to be an assassin. That was why he never dreamed he would be anything but.

And yet, he'd been assigned a mage class—and a necromancer on top of that! Even though Jinwoo's knowledge of jobs mostly came from video games, he knew the basics of what necromancers entailed. They were dreary-looking mages with an army of zombies behind them.

No matter how he thought about it, he was hard-pressed to make any connection between that kind of character and himself. Jinwoo frowned and shook his head.

……I need to calm down first.

Even if his mind was a jumbled mess right now, he had to handle this calmly. Tranquility was his special weapon. As his anger subsided, he was able to center himself.

Wait, this is reminding me of……

Denial followed by anger. Jinwoo realized he was going through the five stages of grief like a hospital patient who had received devastating news from their doctor.

I think the next step is bargaining…or maybe compromise?

But there was no way to bargain or compromise with the system. If he had to find one good thing about being a necromancer, it was that… Well, according to the system, he could command an army of his own.

The problem is that it would be an army of skeletons and rotting corpses.

Everyone would go nuts if he walked around with that kind of battalion trailing behind him. People already feared hunters as much as they admired them, and the system wanted him to become a

hunter who led an army of the undead. Whether or not the job suited him, he didn't think he could handle it.

Ping!

[Will you accept this job?]

The system required a response. That was comforting.

At least I have a say……

Jinwoo gave a sigh of relief. If the system wasn't forcing it onto him, it meant that there would be other opportunities. If that was the case, there was nothing to think about.

Jinwoo happily (?) declined the offer.

"No."

As he did, the system asked him again.

[Necromancer is a hidden class. Will you still decline?]

Even though it was a similar question, his answer didn't come as easily the second time. He hesitated to reply.

A hidden class……?

It sounded like something out of a video game, but hunters with unique abilities did actually exist. He'd heard stories of a hunter who could generate a shield and one who could give buffs.

Rumor has it that Yoonho Baek, guild master of the White Tiger Guild, has the ability to transform into a magic beast.

Hunters with special capabilities were recruited by large guilds and enjoyed extraordinary privileges.

Is a hidden class something like that…?

If that was the case……

It might be good to accept.

What the system had said popped into his head.

It recommended the necromancer job because I desire great power.

That meant necromancers were that powerful. Considering how most awakened beings with rare abilities were support-type hunters, this was encouraging. A special ability for fighting. Jinwoo started to get excited.

If only I could experience what it would be like to be a necromancer, this wouldn't be as hard a decision…

But it was never that easy, was it? He couldn't exactly make things happen to suit his wishes, and he'd never even heard of a hunter with this kind of power before. How could a mage control his own army and fight at the sa—

He didn't have to finish that thought.

Oh……

Jinwoo looked at the remnants of the knights around him.

Those mages!

The mages from the job-change quest could have been demonstrating the necromancer abilities. The knights were their armies.

There's no doubt.

It wasn't easy battling knights that rushed into battle with no regard for their own lives. If he hadn't worked out how to defeat them or if the mages had been skilled fighters……

Instead of all this scrap metal, I'd be the one on the ground.

Jinwoo turned away from the knights and raised his head. His eyes were sparkling.

I'm already a brawler.

That was the difference between him and the mages.

If a mage who could hold his own could also command an entire army… Wouldn't that be the absolute worst nightmare for his enemies?

And maybe……

He'd always dreamed of clearing a B-rank dungeon or higher by himself. Jinwoo swallowed hard. If he continued to level up even after becoming a necromancer, the troops under his command would become stronger as well. The results of that synergy were unimaginable.

I wouldn't be leveling up alone.

His army would advance as well.

Is it possible……?

Suddenly, he got goose bumps. Jinwoo looked up at the floating window. It was still waiting for his reply.

[Necromancer is a hidden class. Will you still decline?]

It wasn't rushing him to make a decision like it usually did. Jinwoo thought to himself:

Is this what you wanted?

Of course, there was no answer. After much agonizing, he eventually reached a decision. If this would grant him power, then he would gladly accept. There was no hesitation this time.

[Will you accept this job?]

"Yes."

The system instantly displayed subsequent messages.

Ping!

[Your job has been finalized.]

[Depending on the advancement points acquired, you may be offered the opportunity to advance to a higher class.]

[Starting calculations.]

[Calculating advancement points……]

While the system was calculating, Jinwoo unwrapped the bandage on his right hand.

Because he'd clutched the dagger so tightly, his palm was swollen and red.

"I'm going to have blisters." He sucked in a breath.

This could easily be healed with a drop of healing potion, and not being able to use potions was proving inconvenient. He finished unwrapping the bandage and was about to put Knight Killer into his inventory when the notification sounded.

Ping!

Jinwoo reflexively turned.

[You have exceeded the expected time limit!]

[Bonus points will be awarded.]

Bonus points… He'd figured as much.

I don't know what the expected time limit was, but I definitely lasted for a long time.

Jinwoo was looking pleased with himself when he was inundated with messages.

[You did not use the Instant Teleportation Stone!]

[Bonus points will be awarded.]

[Leftover HP is over 50 percent!]

[Bonus points will be awarded.]

[You defeated all the enemies!]

[Bonus points will be awarded.]

[Your total advancement points exceeded the achievement threshold.]

[Based on the contract, a special reward will be offered.]

Ping, ping, ping!

What the…?

All the beeping rang in his ears, but he didn't pay it any attention, as his mind was already on something.

A special reward?

The words jumped out at him. A reward—and a "special" one at that. He stopped short of putting Knight Killer into his inventory and focused on the message. His eyes were glued to the screen.

Before long, more messages followed.

Ping!

[Your job has changed from necromancer to shadow monarch.]

[You have learned job-exclusive skills.]

[You have acquired bonus stats.]

[You have acquired Title: The One Who Overcame Adversity.]

Shadow monarch?

Overwhelmed by the unfamiliar terms, Jinwoo hurriedly called up his stat window.

[Name: Jinwoo Sung] **[Level: 51]**

[Job: Shadow Monarch]

There it was.

It's not necromancer?

The system had clearly said Jinwoo would be able to upgrade to a higher class depending on the advancement points he'd earned. It had also mentioned that his total advancement points had exceeded the achievement threshold.

The end result was shadow monarch.

"Then this is……"

Was this the special reward the system was talking about?

Jinwoo was suddenly struck speechless.

……?

Something strange and inexplicable was happening before his very eyes. Past the message holograms, black smoke was exuding from the fallen knights littered on the ground. Nothing like this had occurred prior to the job change. Without their masters, the monsters were basically scrap metal, and yet……

Jinwoo closed the stat window and scanned the area. It wasn't just one or two of them. The black smoke was coming off all the knights.

[Shadow Extraction is possible.]

[Shadow Extraction is possible.]

[Shadow Extraction is possible.]

And with every glance at a foe emitting the black smoke, a message popped up saying that he could perform a "shadow extraction."

Extracting a shadow?

Jinwoo couldn't explain it, but it looked to him like the swirls of smoke were writhing in pain. It felt as if they were reaching out to him, asking him to save them. Were those actual screams he could hear…?

But……

He was utterly certain he could save them from their pain.

Shadow Extraction.

[Please designate a command word for Skill: Shadow Extraction.]

I have to personally choose a command word?

Jinwoo thought about it for a second before instinctively blurting out a word.

"Arise."

As soon as he spoke……

"Haaaaaaaah…"

Low moans came out of nowhere as the shadows of the knights squirmed, almost like they were alive.

Jinwoo inspected his surroundings again. All the shadows around him were shifting. Soon, a black hand rose up out of a shadow. It slammed into the ground and pulled itself up.

Holy shit!

Jinwoo's eyes were about to pop out of his head.

It looked like a person or, rather, a soldier in the shape of a human. One by one, knights covered in pitch-black armor rose from the shadows.

This is a skill?

By the time Jinwoo pulled himself together, there were tens of soldiers standing at attention.

[Shadow Extraction successful.]

Tens of knights surrounded him.

What in the……?

Jinwoo walked up to the knight closest to him. He placed his hand on the armor, which felt like actual metal. It wasn't just that it looked like armor, but these were genuine knights ready to march into battle.

They're humanoid, but…

They weren't. Jinwoo couldn't detect any signs of life from them. They didn't breathe or have heartbeats.

Furthermore…

"……"

Jinwoo held in a gasp. When he looked into the eye holes of the helmet, it was like staring into the proverbial abyss. He slowly stepped away because it felt as if his body would be sucked into the darkness.

This thing was made from a shadow?

Jinwoo called up the skill window. As the system had informed him, there were new job-exclusive skills there.

[Job-Exclusive Skills]

Active skill: Shadow Extraction Lv.1, Shadow Storage Lv.1

He decided to start with the first one on the list.

[SKILL: SHADOW EXTRACTION LV.1]

Job-exclusive skill.

No mana required.

Extracts mana from a body whose life has come to an end and transforms it into a shadow soldier. Odds of extraction failure rise depending on the target's stats and the amount of time between death and extraction.

Active Shadow Extraction: 30/30

After reading that description, Jinwoo understood the identity of the soldiers.

……They're all undead.

Shadow soldiers, creatures extracted from the shadows of the dead.

Jinwoo gulped.

If they really are my army……

Jinwoo extended his arm to the right. The soldiers simultaneously turned to the right. He slowly moved his hand in front of him. The soldiers turned in unison to face front.

Jinwoo stood in the heart of the army. He lowered his hand simply to calm himself, but then…

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

The soldiers took a knee as one. He could move them according to his will.

"Whoa……!"

Jinwoo couldn't help his exclamation or his delighted grin.

Okay, this is pretty awesome.

4

SHADOW MONARCH

4
SHADOW MONARCH

Oh, right! A thought crossed his mind.

This isn't time to dawdle.

He'd just witnessed the power of his new skill. He could turn monsters he'd defeated into his soldiers, and there was one monster nearby that he absolutely had to make his minion!

He climbed to the top of the pile of armor that once was the iron golem. From this higher vantage, he was able to scan the whole dungeon at once.

……

Jinwoo squinted…and there it was! He immediately headed in that direction.

Tmp, tmp, tmp, tmp!

He was so impatient that he arrived in a matter of seconds even without using Dash.

Gulp.

Jinwoo swallowed nervously as he looked at the lifeless husk he wanted to use Shadow Extraction on. The knight was in the exact same spot where Jinwoo had left it.

……Igris the Bloodred.

The state of the crimson knight embedded in the wall indicated how fierce the previous battle had been. Jinwoo stood before Igris. Only several hours earlier, it had been a formidable enemy that had endangered Jinwoo's life, but now it was the best raw material he could hope for.

Jinwoo was relieved to see the same vapor coming out of Igris.

[Shadow Extraction is possible.]

His face lit up.

Great.

He knew the drill. He took a deep breath and uttered the command word.

"Arise."

This was the trigger for activating the Shadow Extraction skill…but nothing happened.

……?

Jinwoo was confused, but a chime sounded before he could try again.

[You have exceeded the number of shadows you may extract.]

[To extract another shadow, you must release and return any or all shadow soldiers to the void.]

[Shadow soldiers sent to the void may not be recalled.]

Ah, right, he'd seen that at the end of the skill information.

[Active Shadow Extraction: 30/30]

The maximum number of shadows he could extract was thirty, which meant his current army stood at thirty.

Jinwoo turned around. The shadow soldiers had followed him and were now standing at attention.

When did they follow me?

They moved as silently as shadows, which was fitting, given what they were.

Getting back to the point, in order to extract Igris's shadow, the system said he had to release one of them.

But……

He felt bad about getting rid of any of his soldiers. Even though he'd known them for only a few minutes, he was already attached to them. Jinwoo reluctantly scanned his troops. Each time his eyes focused on one, its name and level appeared.

[SHADOW INFANTRY LV.1]
Regular rank

[SHADOW INFANTRY LV.1]
Regular rank

They all had the same name and level.

Their origins are identical, so……

And then he came across three that stood out from the infantry in the back of the group.

Those are……?

Unlike the infantry, this trio wore robes.

[SHADOW MAGE LV.1]
Elite rank

“Ah.” Jinwoo quickly made the connection; they were the three mages who had controlled the iron golem. They, too, had become undead with his command.

Twenty-seven infantry and three mages.

This was why being rare was to one’s advantage. He exempted the mages from his selection, as they were fewer in number, and eventually settled on an infantry soldier next to him.

……Apologies.

“Release.”

Fwsh…

The soldier turned into black smoke, which dispersed in the still air, leaving no trace.

……

Jinwoo looked apologetically at the spot where the soldier had stood before refocusing his attention on Igris. He’d had to sacrifice one of his precious soldiers to make Igris a shadow. This had better pay off.

He struck while the iron was hot and attempted the extraction right away.

“Arise.”

Igris’s previously motionless shadow began to twitch as if it were coming to life.

Let’s go!

He squeezed his fists tight. He had a good feeling about this.

[Beginning Shadow Extraction attempt.]

[Attempting to extract……]

What would Igris look like as a shadow? Jinwoo’s palms were sweaty in anticipation.

But then…

Tink!

A message appeared, accompanied by an alarm that sounded like metal snapping.

[Shadow Extraction has failed.]

“What?”

[You have two attempts remaining.]

“Phew.” He let out a sigh of relief when he saw he had a couple more chances.

It did say something about that……

The explanation had mentioned that the extraction failure rate increased according to the target’s ability level, but he was still taken aback when it actually happened. Since this was his first failure, it felt like a slap in the face. It also seemed like there was a limit to how many times he could try.

I have two chances left……

If he failed both times, would Igris return to the void like the soldier he had sacrificed? Thinking about the worst-case scenario made him anxious, so Jinwoo shook his head to clear it.

Let’s not be so negative.

Just think positive. Ask and ye shall receive, right?

He attempted an extraction for the second time, filled with a mix of apprehension and eagerness.

“Arise.”

But his hopes were shattered.

Tink!

[Shadow Extraction has failed.]

[You have one attempt remaining.]

……

Igris was as much of a pain in the ass dead as it had been when it was alive.

Jinwoo hadn't wanted to consider the possibility of failing twice, but…

Phew…

The hunter exhaled hard. There were no more chances after this. This was his last shot.

He closed his eyes and cleared his thoughts.

This might all come down to probability……

Or maybe he wasn't feeling desperate enough.

He slowly opened his eyes.

It felt like the vapor emanating from Igris was reaching out to him, pleading for rescue. Jinwoo's face turned solemn. He extended out his hand as if trying to take the smoke by the hand.

"Arise."

He didn't do it on purpose. Jinwoo didn't realize it in that moment, but his voice was grave and rang through the room.

And then…!

Hwoooooaaah!

Out of nowhere came a chilling moan, and a cutting wind blew through the room.

Is this…?

Jinwoo's face lit up. The same phenomenon had occurred when his soldiers first rose out of the shadows.

"Haaaaaaah…"

Like he thought, once the moaning ended, a long black arm emerged out of the shadow. The moment the hand touched the ground, a message materialized.

[Shadow Extraction successful.]

Jinwoo cheered. "Yes!"

His success tasted sweeter because it had followed two failed attempts. And there was even more good news.

[The voice of the shadow monarch has awakened the dead's fighting spirit.]

[Shadow Enhancement successful.]

[The shadow will start with a base level of 7.]

Enhancement successful?

A soldier's base level could be higher than one?

Jinwoo was in disbelief. Just as the message had said, the newly spawned knight was labeled as level 7.

"Huh!" Jinwoo exclaimed.

Igris looked just as he remembered, with the long mane on the helmet, armor of a refined design, and a majestic cloak. The only difference was that the once bloodred armor was now as black as night. Other than that, everything else was identical.

If he didn't know better, Jinwoo would have mistaken this for Igris coming back to life.

But…

……

The reborn Igris held no hostility for Jinwoo. He stood there silently awaiting his orders.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

Jinwoo's heart raced as he gazed upon Igris. He had a smile on his face. But something struck him as strange. Jinwoo's gaze moved to the space above his creation's head.

Where's his name?

[?? LV.7]

Knight rank

Instead of a name, there were question marks.

His rank is different, too.

Jinwoo knew Igris's level would be higher because of the enhancement, but Igris seemed quite different from the infantry.

Had the system read his mind? It sent a message with impeccable timing.

Ping!

[You may bestow names upon shadow soldiers of a knight rank or higher.]

[Bestowed names will be kept until a shadow is released.]

[Please choose a name.]

A name?

Jinwoo felt lost at this unforeseen request but then smiled in relief as he remembered that this creature already had a name. Continuing to use it shouldn't present a problem.

[Please choose a name.]

The message flashed, as if urging Jinwoo to call the soldier's name.

He opened his mouth. "Igris the Blood……"

Wait a minute. Jinwoo would have to refer to the knight by whatever name he chose, which meant having to call Igris by his full name whenever he needed him. Just the thought made Jinwoo cringe.

……That's way too cheesy.

Ultimately, he decided to simplify the name. "Igris."

[Would you like to use "Igris"?]

"Sure."

As soon as Jinwoo responded, the question marks above the knight's head were replaced with his name.

[IGRIS LV.7]

Knight Rank

Even though Jinwoo was recycling his minion's previous name, he felt proud of what he had just accomplished. It made it feel like Igris was his.

My very own soldier……

Jinwoo turned around.

Twenty-nine other shadow soldiers were awaiting his orders. It was still a small number.

Only thirty……

It could be because his skill level with Shadow Extraction was still low, or maybe he needed to further increase his intelligence stat. One thing was for sure: His ranks would only grow.

I have a legit army.

It wasn't an army of skeletons and rotting corpses but an army of shadows.

Now, there was only one problem left. How was he supposed to go anywhere with these guys? The thought gave Jinwoo a major headache.

It doesn't matter whether they're skeletons or shadows.

Jinwoo would definitely attract attention walking down the street with them. Not only that, but this was beyond the capabilities of an awakened being. He would be under constant scrutiny, or worse, they might demand he disband his army.

Jinchul Woo, the head of the Hunter's Association's Surveillance Team……

Tough-looking people like him would come around every day causing a fuss. Jinwoo felt frustrated just imagining it.

That was probably why the other skill existed.

Skills.

Jinwoo called up the skills window.

[Job-Exclusive Skills]

Active skill: Shadow Extraction Lv.1, Shadow Storage Lv.1

Shadow Storage, the skill he had skimmed past before. It was clear from the name that this would be exactly what he needed.

* * *

[SKILL: SHADOW STORAGE LV.1]

Job-exclusive skill.

No mana required.

Shadow soldiers can be stored by absorbing them into the caster's shadow.

Stored soldiers can be summoned or reabsorbed at any time.

Number of shadows stored: 0/20

I knew it.

Jinwoo nodded. He'd guessed the skill's function would be storage because it had been in the name. But there was one thing he couldn't have foreseen.

The problem is how many I can store……

The maximum number of shadows he could store was less than the number of shadows he could currently create. He had raised thirty of them, but he could only store twenty. That meant he had to get rid of ten more.

That sucks.

The pain is the same no matter which of their own ten fingers someone chooses to bite. It was painful enough getting rid of one, but now he had to choose ten.

Hmm……

Jinwoo's heart was heavy just looking at the soldiers. Naturally, Igris with his knight rank was exempt. The three unique mage soldiers were also safe. The most disposable minions were those in the infantry. Since he'd released the soldier closest to him the last time, this time Jinwoo went with the ten at the back.

I'm sorry.

He prayed for them to rest in peace.

Fwshhhh…

In an instant, the soldiers turned to dust and were gone. It didn't upset him as much as the first time. Is that what happened when one got used to saying good-bye?

In any case…

Jinwoo took one last look at his remaining ranks before activating Shadow Storage. All the soldiers melted like ice back into shadows, which subsequently pooled at his feet.

And now they're absorbed into my shadow……!

As per the explanation, the soldiers permeated Jinwoo's own shadow. It was over rather quickly. In the blink of an eye, his army had vanished without a trace.

……It's hard to believe even after seeing it with my own eyes.

He gazed down at his shadow in awe.

Then, as if the system had been lying in wait, multiple chimes rang out.

Ping!

[You have tested all the job-exclusive skills.]

[You have completed the job-change quest.]

[The exit gate will be generated.]

It's finally over……

It had been a long and difficult journey. Jinwoo took one last look at the dungeon and was overcome with emotion. Evidence of hard-fought battles could be seen throughout. Crushed knights, cracked walls, a toppled pillar. The iron golem responsible for toppling the aforementioned pillar was now a pile of scrap metal.

But he'd certainly been well compensated for all the trouble he'd encountered here. He'd earned a new job and new skills as well as his own powerful army and countless items.

He curled his lips into a smile and, without looking back, turned away from the dungeon. The gate leading to the outside world was waiting as if to congratulate him on a safe return.

As soon as he set one foot through the gate, his environment instantly transformed. He was back at that empty patch on the hill, the very spot where he'd accepted the job-change quest.

It was already five o'clock in the morning, almost sunrise. Jinwoo winced when he saw what time it was.

If I knew it was going to take this long, I would've told Jinah beforehand.

Thankfully, there had been times back when he worked for the association that he'd come home late because the raids had taken longer than expected.

He looked over his shoulder. The gate he'd just exited was already gone, as if it had never been there.

Huh……

Looking at the empty space, it felt as if he'd been in some kind of twisted dreamland until now. But there was no way it could have just been a dream.

Jinwoo thought of his soldiers with their inky-black armor. As soon as he did, they emerged from his shadow.

……

At first, he'd regarded them as monsters. Shadow soldiers, beasts that had strolled out of shadows of the dead at his beck and call. But if they were monsters, what would one call the person who created and commanded them?

Jinwoo smirked.

I guess they can call me whatever they like……

Jinwoo recalled the shadows.

His footsteps were light as he made his way down the hill.

* * *

Jinwoo slept until well past noon. Since the sun was already rising by the time he'd gone to bed, this was understandable.

Riiing, riiing!

His cell phone disrupted his slumber. His hand fumbled around his pillow and grasped his phone after much difficulty. Jinwoo answered without opening his eyes.

"Hello?" His voice was heavy with sleep.

"Whoa… Are you still sleeping? Do you know what time it is?!"

Jinah's appalled voice came over the receiver.

In response, he asked, "What time is it?"

"Two in the afternoon!"

"What?" He squinted at the screen to check the time. It was true.

"……You remember that the parent-teacher meeting is today, right?"

She sounded worried.

Jinwoo slowly pushed himself up. "When is it again?"

"Five o'clock!"

"Don't worry, I'll be there."

"You're the best! Call me when you're almost here, okay?" she asked sweetly before hanging up.

Scritch, scritch.

Jinwoo ruffled his bedhead before lethargically getting up. It'd be tight if he got ready now.

It's my little sister's homeroom teacher, after all.

The person in charge of her senior year of high school. The most crucial moment of Jinah's education.

So I can't just wear whatever, can I?

He opened the closet to look through his outfits but was greeted by a musty smell. That wasn't a good sign.

Jinwoo grimaced. He continued sifting through his clothes, but the only acceptable outfit he could find was the old suit he'd worn once at his own high school graduation.

Does this even fit?

Jinwoo tried on the suit, and as he suspected, it was too tight and hard to move.

I'm definitely bigger than before.

It was even more obvious when wearing his old clothes. They were almost bursting at the seams. So what now…?

As Jinwoo thought about what he could wear, he spotted the bank statements and checkbook he'd received from Jinho. They were for the account where the money from selling essence stones was deposited. He looked back and forth between the tight clothes he was wearing and the official documents, and a smile slid across his face.

It has been a while since I've gone shopping.

Before he could do that, though, he had one small thing he had to take care of. Well, not exactly one small thing.

He peeled off the tight suit, sat on the edge of the bed, and called up the stat window.

Stat window.

A long string of words materialized in front of his eyes.

Ping!

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: Shadow Monarch]

[HP: 11,035]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 51]

[Title: Wolf Assassin (and 1 other)]

[MP: 1,022]

[Stats]

Strength:	132
Stamina:	91
Agility:	111
Intelligence:	70
Perception:	93

(Available ability points: 10)

Physical damage reduced by: 46 percent

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1, Advanced Dagger Wielding Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.2, Murderous Intent Lv.1, Fatal Strike Lv.1, Dagger Throw Lv.1, Stealth Lv.1

[Job-Exclusive Skills]

Active skill: Shadow Extraction Lv.1, Shadow Storage Lv.1

[Item Equipped]

Crimson Knight's Helmet (S), Warden's Collar (A), High-Rank Knight's Chestplate (B), High-Rank Knight's Gauntlets (B), High-Rank Mage's Ring (B), Mid-Rank Assassin's Boots (C)

"Hah……"

Jinwoo stuck his tongue between his teeth upon seeing the endless list on the info screen.

It wasn't that long ago when it was pretty bare……

That had been the case once upon a time, but now, his head spun looking at just his skills and the items lists.

What stood out most, though, was his job.

[Job: Shadow Monarch]

Just yesterday, it had read *None*, and if he was being honest, seeing that used to bother him every time he opened the stat window. It bothered him because the word before it was *Job*.

Even though that wasn't exactly the case, in a lot of people's eyes, hunters were basically the same as deadbeats when there weren't

any raids. How could it not bother him to see that he had “no job” every time he opened the info screen?

A deer that’s surprised when it sees an elk will be surprised when it sees its own reflection, and Jinwoo couldn’t help the twinge he felt every time he saw the job status. Even though he knew it didn’t mean that he was unemployed, it still bothered him.

But from this day on, it would no longer be an issue.

“Ha-ha!” Jinwoo laughed in spite of himself.

I suppose I’m being too hard on myself.

If he had raked in the money like other hunters, he wouldn’t have cared less what other people thought of him when he wasn’t on raids. But that hadn’t been a possibility for him. He couldn’t confidently admit to others that he was a hunter because he was an E ranker who could barely defend his own life.

“I’m an E-rank hunter.”

Whenever he said that, people with common knowledge about hunters would praise him for doing dangerous work but poke fun at his rank behind his back.

That was what had made him so self-conscious whenever he looked at his stats. But he had a job now or, rather, a specialty.

Being a hunter was still his job, so it would be more accurate to say that being a shadow monarch was his specialty.

Even though it wasn’t the path I’d hoped for……

Still, he had no regrets. In fact, he was very satisfied with how things had turned out. If he wasn’t in his room, he would’ve summoned Igris and the other shadow soldiers this very moment.

Jinwoo wanted to test just how powerful his minions were. If they could access 100 percent of the strength they'd had when they were alive…

That's probably not the case, though.

But he was giddy imagining it.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

He excitedly ran through several raid simulations in his head.

He became curious as to how Jinho would react to all this.

Heh.

He chortled as he imagined Jinho standing wide-eyed with his mouth agape.

Wait, what if……?

He could restore the dead, but maybe he wasn't limited to monsters and magic beasts……

Can I extract shadows from dead hunters?

Of course, he didn't want to imagine such a situation happening with a human being. Summoning an undead soldier from a dead person's shadow… Just thinking about it gave him the willies.

But…

Despite this…

What if I can get the shadow of an A- or S-rank hunter?

The power he'd have would be inconceivable. If shadow soldiers had even half the power from when they were alive, he and his army would be able to clean out a high-rank dungeon on their own. His heart danced at all the possibilities.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

But Jinwoo shook his head.

Turning a human into the undead is……

That would be crossing a line. Whether he could was beside the point; he wouldn't want to stoop so low. He might consider it if the deceased was an asshole who deserved it, but…

It's not like there are a lot of opportunities to fight other hunters.

Even if such an opportunity ever presented itself, there would be several problems. Chief among them being that a human wasn't the same as a monster or a magic beast.

Right. For now, he was satisfied with the soldiers he had.

Besides, I have Igris, who used to be a dungeon boss.

A level 7, knight-rank shadow soldier. How powerful could he be? Jinwoo couldn't wait for the next raid to find out.

Happily, he looked back down at the window, and his gaze drifted to something else.

[Title: Wolf Assassin (and 1 other)]

……There's one more?

Ah, yes. He remembered receiving a second as a reward for completing the job-change quest.

Jinwoo checked the hidden title.

[TITLE: THE ONE WHO OVERCAME ADVERSITY]
A title given to those who have gloriously overcome adversity. Stat values will increase proportionally as HP is lost (1 percent increase per 1 percent loss).

Awesome!

This was an amazing buff that would increase his abilities as his health decreased.

Wolf Assassin, with its 40 percent buff against animal-type monsters, made for a great title, too, but it had its limitations, making it difficult to get any use.

If I'm not facing off against animal-type magic beasts, it's basically like I have no title.

But now he'd acquired a new title with a handy buff that also complimented the passive skill Willpower very well.

Without further ado, Jinwoo switched his title.

[Title: The One Who Overcame Adversity (and 1 other)]

The title he wasn't using would be hidden, but he could change it back as needed.

Next up, my stats.

He'd received three rewards for exceeding the achievement threshold. The first had been an upgrade to a higher class, and the second had been the title.

The last was a stat boost.

[Stats]

Strength:	132
Stamina:	91
Agility:	111
Intelligence:	70
Perception:	93

(Available ability points: 10)

Physical damage reduced by: 46 percent

He had ten points to distribute. In the past, he would've allocated them to agility or perception, but the situation changed. Instead, Jinwoo invested all ten points in intelligence.

Even so, his intelligence was still only a measly eighty points.

Ping!

[Stats]

Strength: 132

Stamina: 91 Agility: 111

Intelligence: 80

Perception: 93

(Available ability points: 0)

Physical damage reduced by: 46 percent

When compared to strength or agility, his intelligence was really lacking. It was even lower than stamina, which he'd ignored for a while when he had decided to focus on raising agility. Clearly, Jinwoo had severely underestimated the importance of the intelligence stat.

I had no idea I would be using magic.

His plan for the time being was to invest any ability points he received in intelligence. That being said, he wasn't planning on changing his fighting style.

The new skill I received is also an assassination type anyway.

During the course of the last battle, he'd gained a new skill, Dagger Throw. Obviously, this was a skill pertaining only to daggers.

[SKILL: DAGGER THROW LV.1]
Active skill.

30 mana required.

Cause damage by throwing a dagger. The higher the level of the skill, the greater the accuracy rate and damage will become.

As I thought.

Jinwoo had always been a brawler. He couldn't change his fundamentals just because of a new job or skills. His daggers would still be his primary method of attack, and his shadow skills would be his backup.

At least until I get my intelligence up enough.

He was armed with excellent fighting capabilities and an assisting army to support him. His overall plans hadn't changed despite the job-change quest.

What I didn't expect was……

The shadow soldiers seemed like they'd be more useful than he'd originally thought. He would never have predicted that a boss creature would be one of them.

……Still.

It'd be a waste of experience and training to switch up his dagger skills for his new shadow skills. And he'd just bought Knight Killer, too.

If I'd known I'd become a mage hunter, I would've bought a magic wand or something from the shop.

But then he probably would've been overwhelmed by the knights and failed the job-change quest.

Now that he'd checked all the changes, Jinwoo closed out the stat window.

Wait, what time is it?

Twenty minutes had flown by just like that. He scratched his head.

I'd better pick up the speed.

Jinwoo cracked a smile. His stats weren't useful just for fighting magic beasts. When he focused, time slowed down. Or, to be exact, Jinwoo got faster.

He opened the door and left the room, went to the bathroom, and showered, dried off, picked an outfit, and stood in front of the mirror. That took him all of three minutes. He could've moved even faster, but he held back so as not to wreck his old, run-down apartment.

My hair isn't completely dry yet, but…

He'd saved twenty minutes, so it'd dry in time. He decided to head out.

Jinwoo was walking out of the room when he spotted something and paused. His house key was on his desk. In the past, he would've been annoyed as he went back to grab the key. Now, instead of walking back, he simply extended his hand in its direction.

When else would I use it if not now?

Ruler's Hand!

The key inched slowly toward him at first but soon flew into Jinwoo's palm like it was being drawn to a strong magnet.

Shhhp!

Jinwoo grinned as he caught the key. With that, Jinwoo, who had finished getting ready to leave in a matter of minutes, started whistling as he closed the door behind him.

* * *

Jinwoo first stopped at the bank. He was curious how much money he'd saved up from selling essence stones.

Although I've been too busy to come…

As the squad leader, Jinho was the one in charge of the essence stones. He had told Jinwoo that he sold the essence stones as soon as the raids were done for the day and deposited the money into the account. He never mentioned in detail how much money there was.

He goes on and on about anything and everything except finances.

Jinho didn't seem to have much interest in the topic. Maybe because he'd grown up rich and around money, it was the furthest thing from his mind. His main topics of conversation were celebrities, raids, and his favorite movies and songs. Though it was difficult to call it a conversation; Jinho did most of the talking with Jinwoo pitching in occasionally.

Now that I think about it……

Despite being very talkative, Jinho never mentioned his family. That was interesting. That had been the case for as far back as Jinwoo could remember, from the very first time they'd met.

Just as Jinwoo concluded that this was odd, he arrived at the bank.

I picked the wrong day.

The ATMs were undergoing maintenance, so he had no other choice. Jinwoo entered the bank, took a number, and waited his turn to see a teller.

“Hello.” It was a female teller with a bob cut and a bright smile. She politely asked, “How may I help you?”

“I’d like an updated bank statement, please.”

“Certainly.”

Still smiling, the female teller took his documents.

Jinwoo looked around while he waited. The place was busy despite being an ordinary weekday afternoon.

While he was people watching, the teller’s eyes suddenly shot open in shock after seeing his account balance.

Whoa!

[Balance: 1,482,920,000 won]

She checked the numbers again, but it was definitely over a billion won. Plus, this wasn’t an amount he’d saved up over time. More than a hundred million won had been deposited daily for the past week or so.

But he looks so young.

The teller had assumed Jinwoo was a college student who’d come in to update his mother’s account, but now she saw him in a completely different light. Her next question was more in her own self-interest.

“Oh my. May I ask what you do for a living?” Her cheeks were flushed, and she peeked at Jinwoo as if embarrassed about asking a personal question.

He responded nonchalantly. “I’m a hunter.”

“Ah…” She was already nodding before she realized. So the rumors were true.

I’ve heard that hunters earn quite a bit.

She'd had no idea their income was this good. She suddenly felt inferior about being an ordinary salaried employee. A minute ago, he'd been a regular customer like everyone else, but now he was someone from an entirely different world.

He must be a high-rank hunter.

After all, this was not the account balance of your average hunter. This was her first time meeting a high-rank hunter. The extraordinary circumstances made her heart skip a beat.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

Her heart beat faster. A "young client" with a balance in the billions was considered a VIP at the bank. And as a hunter, he was a VVIP.

She went into sales mode in order to keep this particular VVIP, pulling products from the bank onto the counter. "Our bank has just released a new product only for our VIP clients, you see."

Her smile was genuine, not businesslike. Her eyes were fixed on Jinwoo.

Oh, wow……

His hair was a bit messy, and he looked like he'd thrown on whatever clothes were lying around. It seemed like she was catching a glimpse of a day in the life of a capable man who had barely made time for this errand in his busy schedule.

"This product has very good reviews from our clients. Would you like to sign up for it?"

Jinwoo declined. "No, thank you."

"Oh… I see." The teller sounded disappointed.

Worried that things might get drawn out, Jinwoo decided to take his leave. "Thank you for your help. Have a nice day."

He ignored her eyes following him as he left the bank. As soon as the door shut behind him…

“Whew.”

…Jinwoo breathed a sigh of relief.

He’d noticed the way she looked at him differently once he revealed his job as a hunter. The stares and attention of strangers were common for most hunters, but it was all still new to him.

I suppose I need to get used to it.

Things would get even worse after he was reevaluated and assigned a higher rank. He’d heard there were tons of reporters and fans who hounded hunters. Looking up, he spotted a soft drink ad featuring a popular hunter on a billboard on the side of a skyscraper. Before gates appeared, that billboard had probably featured a pop idol or star athlete.

That’s right. In this day and age, hunters received more attention and adoration than celebrities. Jinwoo wouldn’t be an exception.

Really, the only people who didn’t like hunters these days were employees of insurance companies.

Putting that aside……

Jinwoo was able to check his balance after leaving the bank. He was gobsmacked.

One billion, four hundred eighty……!

He’d made close to 1.5 billion won from nine raids. That averaged out to 160 million won per C-rank dungeon. He’d made 180 million won in the C-rank dungeon he’d raided with Dongsuk’s squad. That put the average income from a C-rank dungeon between 150 to 200 million won.

No wonder the teller was impressed.

* * *

He'd checked his balance, and after treating himself to a new suit from a department store, Jinwoo got a nice haircut nearby, since he still had time left.

"Hmm."

He was a totally different person from when he'd left home.

It really is nice to have money.

They say clothes make the man. Jinwoo looked at his refection in a store window and rolled his shoulders back.

Perfect.

At least I'll make a good first impression.

He straightened out his clothes before checking his phone and seeing that it was already 4:20.

Jinah said to get there by five.

If he left now, he'd arrive right on time.

"Taxi!"

The taxi pulled up to the front of Jinah's school at exactly the time she'd specified. Jinwoo saw his sister waiting for him.

"Jinah."

It took a moment for her to recognize him.

"Jinwoo?" She blinked. "Are…are you really Jinwoo Sung?"

"Don't you recognize your own brother?"

Her voice raised as she looked him up and down. "You look like a different person!"

"What, did you want me to wear flip-flops and sweatpants to this meeting?"

“Wow……” Jinah could only stare.

“Your chin’s about to fall off. I’m going ahead.”

Since it didn’t look like his sister was about to show him the way, he started off. Jinwoo had been a student at this school five years ago, so he knew the building like the back of his hand. The only place a parent-teacher meeting could be was either the faculty room or the guidance counselor’s office. Since this meeting was regarding Jinah’s university application, he guessed it was probably the latter.

Jinwoo’s strides quickened.

“H-hang on, wait for me!” Jinah rushed to keep up with her brother.

“Hello, sir.”

“Hmm? Oh, hello.”

Jinwoo greeted several teachers along the way. They all stopped and stared after him.

Who is that?

A graduate? But how could I forget such a distinguished student?

Is he a new teacher?

It wasn’t just the faculty who turned to look his way.

“Wow, he’s cute.”

“Who’s that?”

“Isn’t that Jinah with him?”

“Must be Jinah’s older brother. He’s pretty cool.”

A fit body and a fashionable suit were the surefire combination that would make any average-looking guy turn the heads of high school girls.

Not that Jinwoo was interested in any of this.

……

The whisperings of high school girls went in one ear and automatically exited the other.

On the other hand, Jinah was having tons of fun. She was picking up everything being said about her brother. As soon as she caught up to him, she elbowed him in the side.

“Hey, you’re quite popular.”

He ignored her ribbing.

“You don’t have a girlfriend, right?”

He continued to ignore her.

“Want me to introduce you to a cute high school girl?”

This time, Jinwoo coolly reached over and pinched her cheek. “Stop being silly.”

“Y-yessir.” As soon as Jinwoo let go, she protested while rubbing her sore cheek.

“Hmph, it’s so obvious you’re enjoying the attention, though……”

They were still bickering when they arrived at the guidance counselor’s office. Jinah, who had taken the lead at some point, spun around to face him.

“We’re here!”

Jinwoo moved to enter but stopped when Jinah didn’t follow.

“You coming?”

“It’s a parent-teacher-only meeting. I have to head back now.”

Ah. Jinwoo remembered having a similar conference during his own senior year. Only then, he hadn’t been able to invite anyone to his meeting.

That was when Mom's condition started getting more and more serious.

She had been in and out of the hospital a lot back in those days. Jinwoo hadn't told his mother about the parent-teacher meeting because he thought it would be too much for her and, as a result, ended up having to deal with his homeroom teacher's annoyance.

Remembering all that made him understand why Jinah had been so anxious about the meeting today.

Jinwoo smiled at her. "Studying late again tonight?"

"Yeah. You can head home without me."

"Got it." His hand sneaked up to her hair and mussed it. "Study hard. I'll see you at home."

"Hey, I told you not to do stuff like that."

"See ya later." Jinwoo grinned at her as he entered the office.

Jinah pouted as she fixed her hair. "Still treating me like I'm a child……"

Not that she really hated it. But had anyone seen that? She furtively checked to make sure the coast was clear before relaxing and skipping back to class.

* * *

If Jinwoo had to sum up his first impression of Jinah's homeroom teacher in a single word…

Hmm……

…it'd be *virtuous*.

"Jinah's older brother?"

She was a middle-aged lady with a kind face and the type of smile that put people at ease. The woman didn't question Jinwoo being

there in lieu of a parent, perhaps because she was aware of the family's situation.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jinah's homeroom teacher. Who knew she had such a wonderful brother? Ha-ha!"

After receiving such a warm welcome, Jinwoo bowed politely.

I've never seen her before.

She must've started at the school after he had graduated.

People say the first impression is the most lasting, and he found himself able to relax after they exchanged greetings.

Even though I'm younger than she is, she's addressing me politely.

Jinwoo didn't think his sister would have any problems in her senior year with a homeroom teacher like this.

"Please have a seat."

She sat back down, and Jinwoo took a chair across the table from her.

"You have nothing to worry about concerning Jinah."

It was a standard parent-teacher conversation. The dialogue flowed easily. Jinah was a model student, so there was no reason for concern.

"You're aware that Jinah wants to go to medical school?"

"Yes."

The teacher began reading off some notes she'd prepared. "Jinah's mock test scores are all excellent, and her grades are very good, so I think she has a great chance. Best not to pressure her too much, though."

Jinwoo silently nodded in agreement.

The passion on the teacher's face told him that she had high hopes for Jinah. Usually, teachers assigned to senior classes were stressed out about their students' grades, since their scores would basically determine their future.

I hear a lot of teachers try to avoid being assigned as homeroom teachers for seniors……

He'd heard that male teachers were often forced to take the senior classes. All things considered, Jinwoo was thankful that Jinah's homeroom teacher seemed to genuinely care. As Jinah's guardian, he was grateful for that fact.

About fifteen minutes later, the meeting was coming to an end.

"Well then……"

Jinwoo was about to get up when the teacher cautiously asked him another question.

"I heard you currently work as a hunter?" Her demeanor turned serious.

Jinwoo sensed that she was getting at something.

"Yes."

"If…if Jinah awakened, would you allow her to become a hunter?"

"No."

Never. Jinwoo was firm in that regard. He didn't even have to think about it.

Her expression grew somber. "That's what I thought……"

As Jinwoo gave her a puzzled look, she seemed to come to a decision and resolutely asked him, "Could you please do me a favor?"

Jinwoo nodded. "If it's something I can do……"

He decided to hear her out. She was his sister's homeroom teacher, after all, and he didn't want to leave a bad impression by rejecting her outright.

She started talking quickly, like she was concerned he might change his mind.

"There's another female student who awakened and is trying to quit school. She stopped coming to class a while ago."

Aha.

This was common. Newly awakened people tended to think of themselves as special despite having no experience and not understanding the reality of being a hunter yet. They didn't realize that very few hunters actually became rich and famous.

The teacher sighed loudly. "If she keeps skipping class, the school will have no choice but to take action, though even if she becomes a hunter, shouldn't she at least graduate from high school first?"

Jinwoo nodded in agreement. His positive response put her a little more at ease.

"Could you help me persuade her to graduate at least?" She managed a small smile.

Jinwoo was curious about only one thing. "What rank has she awakened as?"

"As far as I've heard…it's the lowest rank…"

E rank.

……She'll get herself killed.

He mentally tutted.

E-rank hunters had to be extremely cautious even when entering a dungeon. If they carelessly set foot in one, it would lead to injuries or

even death at least nine times out of ten. It would break his heart to hear a girl his sister's age going through that.

However, in the end, it would all boil down to her choice. No one could make her do anything. Jinwoo felt bad for the girl, but he didn't want to take time out of his busy schedule just to nag at someone about how to live her life.

I don't have any confidence I'll succeed.

Not that she'd appreciate it anyway.

Jinwoo was about to decline the teacher's favor and get up when…

"Jinah knows *****, too."

He found it hard to stand after hearing the name coming out of the teacher's mouth. He confirmed once again.

"Sorry, what was the student's name?"

"*****. Do you know her?"

"……"

Korea really was a small country, after all.

Huh……

Jinwoo was speechless.

* * *

Meanwhile, at the home of Myunghan Yoo, chairman of Yoojin Construction.

Since that morning, expensive import cars had been driving in and out of the residence.

The reason for this was the ancestral memorial ceremony for Byungchul Yoo, the first chairman of Yoojin Group, which was to be held later that evening.

Myunghan Yoo was the richest man in the business sector, and Byungchul Yoo was his father. As the eldest son, Myunghan performed the ceremony every year regardless of how busy his schedule was. As Myunghan's influence was unparalleled, the entire Yoo clan attended the ceremony every year as well.

The president of a security company, the chairman of a pharmaceutical company, the president of a department store… Many of them were powerful people themselves, and their children were also the elite of the elite.

With one exception. Said exception sequestered himself in a quiet corner away from everyone, even though no one had ordered him to.

It was Jinho.

Boring.

He wished this would be over soon. Going on raids with Jinwoo was one hundred—no, one thousand times more fun than this. He wondered what the boss was doing now. Jinho really couldn't imagine what Jinwoo did on days off.

And thus, Jinho sat in his corner where no one could see him, nursing a drink and pondering pointless things.

That's when he heard a voice he loathed. "Hey."

It was him. Standing behind Jinho was someone who was undeniably a capable man, a shining example of an elite. Tall and sporting expensive frames, he was Jinsung, Jinho's older brother. He was also the heir apparent of the Yoojin Construction empire.

Jinsung got right in Jinho's face and looked down at his younger brother.

"Stop acting like a brat. Our relatives have arrived, so you should come and greet them, too."

"……Leave me alone."

"Remember that every stupid thing you do reflects poorly on Father."

There was no love for his brother in Jinsung's overtly dismissive words.

The dislike was mutual, but Jinho didn't have the guts to stand up to him.

"……"

His feelings weren't unfounded. Jinsung was a prodigy among prodigies and claimed the number one spot in anything and everything. It wasn't just his grades, either. After he'd graduated, Jinsung helped his father with various business ventures, all of which flourished.

Compared to his older brother, Jinho didn't have anything to brag about. He'd barely even gotten into university. Jinho always felt small next to him.

"……"

"Pathetic! Tsk, tsk." Jinsung frowned at Jinho hanging his head, then arranged his features into a pleasant smile before striding away.
"Uncle!"

"Oh, hello, Jinsung."

Jinho could lift his head again only after his brother left.

This was why he hated coming home. If it hadn't been for the memorial ceremony…

As Jinho continued to sigh, he heard an alluring but sharp voice coming from behind him.

"Unbelievable. He's so full of himself."

Jinho turned around. It was his cousin Suhyun Yoo, who was a year older than him.

“Did you hear what he just said? Seriously…”

Suhyun approached Jinho and patted him on the shoulder. She put on a sour face.

“Watch this. *Pathetic, tsk, tsk. Pathetic, tsk, tsk.*”

Jinho burst out laughing at Suhyun’s impression.

“Pfft…heh! Stop it. I’m not in the mood.”

“Pathetic, tsk, tsk.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! I said stop!”

Being close in age, they were good friends.

Suhyun stopped in front of Jinho. “Why do you let him walk all over you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re an awakened being. Or are you telling me you can’t take him?”

“So? You think I should beat him up?”

“Well, maybe not that……”

She bit her lip. What would his father do if Jinho landed a fist on his so-called successful brother? Even imagining that was horrifying. She understood perfectly why Jinho always let his brother steamroll him. She glared in Jinsung’s direction.

“In any case, he’s still the same asshole.”

She disliked Jinsung as much as Jinho did. She was one of a select number of people who knew the real Jinsung hidden under his polite demeanor.

But Jinho didn't agree with her, and it wasn't because Jinsung was his older brother. It was because he wanted to beat his big brother fair and square instead of talking behind his back.

As he stayed quiet, Suhyun carefully asked, "So…are you still going to go ahead with that plan?"

"Huh?"

"You wanted to become the guild master to show him up."

Jinho smiled instead of answering her. Who would believe him anyway? He'd be lucky if people didn't laugh at him. A match between Jinho and Jinsung.

Still, his chances of winning had massively increased thanks to his trump card, Jinwoo.

If I can just get a guild master's license……

It was doable. Yes, he could do this.

Suhyun saw the determination in his eyes and put her hands on her hips before saying firmly, "I'd rather die than work under that jerk. I don't want to fight with your father, so you'd better do this."

"……Thanks."

That was how Suhyun cheered him on. She was a former child actor who had awakened as an A-rank hunter. Add the fact that she came from a mega-rich family, and she was one of the most sought-after hunters in Korea. She'd turned down all their offers and chosen to model from time to time instead.

However, she'd recently received an offer she couldn't refuse: become a founding member of the Yoojin Guild. It was a direct order from Chairman Myunghan Yoo himself. Suhyun couldn't reject her uncle, but she didn't want to work for Jinsung.

She had a lot of concerns. Still, though she found it difficult to rely on Jinho, she had no choice but to place her faith in him.

Vmmmm, vmmmm…

Suhyun gestured to the phone vibrating in Jinho's pocket. "Aren't you going to answer that?"

"Oh." Jinho's mind had been elsewhere, so he belatedly reached for his phone.

The number on the screen was a familiar one.

Boss

His face lit up after seeing the caller ID.

"It's me, boss!" He answered enthusiastically. "Yes, yes, boss. No, I can go. Yes. I'll be right there, boss." He hung up.

Suhyun was curious as to what had caused his mood to do a 180 like that. "What? Who was that?"

But there was no time to explain it to her. The boss needed him! Because Jinho also wanted out of this place, his only thought was how to leave as quickly as possible.

"I'll tell you later!"

Suhyun blinked at Jinho as he rushed off. "What's gotten him so excited?"

Jinho always looked like a sad sack at every family gathering, but he'd seemed different just now.

"……Never thought I'd see the day." She definitely needed to grill him about this some other time.

Meanwhile, Jinho searched for his father.

Dinner would be served soon, and he wasn't allowed to skip a meal without his father's permission when the whole family and other relatives were in attendance.

Jinho located his father talking to some people in the distance.

The man had a face resembling a tiger and a strict personality. Jinho found it difficult to deal with his father.

I haven't even talked to him yet, but……

He was already nervous, but he needed to be brave.

Because I promised.

Jinho took two deep breaths and walked toward his father. He felt like turning back several times along the way but forced himself to keep walking. Finally, he arrived in front of the chairman.

"Father……"

The way they interacted, you wouldn't know they were father and son.

Myunghan moved his gaze to Jinho. "What is it?"

The tense atmosphere compelled everyone nearby to scatter.

"May I be excused for a bit?" Jinho's voice was especially meek when he talked to his father. "I'll b-be back before dinner."

"……" Myunghan looked like he might cause a scene, but instead, he heaved a deep sigh and reluctantly gave his permission. "…Go on, then."

Jinho brightened and bowed. "Thank you, Father." Then he was off like a bullet.

Stone-faced, Myunghan was watching his son leave when his wife approached.

"Honey, I got a phone call from Vienna."

He'd been waiting on this news. Myunghan's face finally showed some interest.

"What was the result of the competition?"

"She won. No wonder, given that she's your daughter."

His smile was so brief that someone watching him would've thought they were seeing things.

"Hmm. When is she coming back to Korea?"

"She's so busy this semester that she can only make it back during the break."

Myunghan frowned. "I clearly told her to be here for her grandfather's memorial ceremony."

"Oh, honey. Young people nowadays don't think memorial ceremonies are important."

"Tsk, tsk."

His wife straightened the chairman's tie and spoke tenderly to him.

"And, dear, how about paying Jinho some attention?"

"This again…… A tiger must care for a tiger cub, not a kitten."

"Both the tiger cub and the kitten came from me. And they're your children as well."

"Hmm……"

"Do you know that was the first time I've seen Jinho smile in your presence since he graduated from middle school?"

Was that right? Myunghan perked up and fixed his gaze in the direction Jinho had departed, but even that was brief.

He answered flippantly. "Maybe he has a girlfriend. In any case, everyone is waiting for us. We should head inside."

* * *

At the Hunter's Association Headquarters in Guro-gu, Seoul, an employee inspecting devices stopped in front of a small mana meter.

"Huh? What's wrong with this?"

The number, which should have been fixed at zero, kept fluctuating. It looked like the device was malfunctioning, but that was nothing unusual. It was delicate equipment, known to break often.

"Kim."

"Yes, sir."

The subordinate he'd summoned came up to him.

"How many gates were checked with this mana meter?"

"Which serial number, sir?"

"N-1744B."

Kim nodded as he checked the records. "It was used for seven gates two days ago."

"Two days ago? Let me see."

It was true. Two days ago, seven gates had been measured with this particular mana meter, and four of those had now been closed.

"Were there any problems with the gates?"

"No, I haven't heard anything."

"Really?" The employee scratched his stubbled chin.

Whenever there was an error with a mana meter, raid permits for the gates it had been measured with were canceled right away for obvious reasons. What would happen if hunters entered a gate thinking it was a C rank when it was an A or B in actuality? They wouldn't be able to return safely.

High-rank dungeons were that dangerous. It was similar to the difference in power between a high-rank hunter and a low-rank. That was why the larger guilds handled all the high-rank dungeons.

Should I report this now?

Reporting a problem was easy. Not only would there be complaints from the strike squads that would lose their permits but he would also be blamed if reevaluating the dungeons took too long and there was a dungeon break. Either way, he might get fired.

And after all, I did get a job in the association…

The Hunter's Association was regarded as a public enterprise. To work there, you had to get a certain score on the civil service examination. He felt helpless just thinking about losing his job.

That can't happen.

He shook his head.

It was also pretty clear to the subordinate what he was torn about. He cautiously asked:

"Then……what should we do?"

"Hmm."

It had been two days. If there was a problem, surely something would've happened by now?

"……It should be fine."

"I-is that okay?"

"You think anything would happen? It's already been a couple of days."

"I guess so." The underling nodded in agreement.

"Just report that N-1744B was fine until yesterday and note that it started malfunctioning today."

“Understood.”

* * *

Sangmin, the department manager of the second administration team of the White Tiger Guild.

His back cracked as he straightened up from chopping green onions.

Krik.

“Off.”

Today’s menu was soybean-paste stew. He had mastered many dishes as a single man living on his own for eight years. The turning point had been five years ago. He’d noticed how awful he looked from eating instant food all the time. He decided to learn how to cook for his own good and was now able to whip up any dish even after seeing it only briefly on TV.

However, as mastery involved a return to simplicity and as his skills improved, he found himself mostly making simple dishes like soybean-paste stew.

“Mm, that’s the stuff.”

Sangmin tasted the dish and was impressed by his own cooking. Too bad he had no one to share it with. It really was a tragedy.

Should I invite someone over for dinner sometime?

The face of one of his subordinates popped into his head, but he waved it off. As tired as Sangmin was of being called an old bachelor, he didn’t want people getting the wrong idea from him inviting a male subordinate over for dinner.

Speaking of, I wonder how Kichul’s doing with that task.

Kichul was a smart guy who listened well, but he could also be somewhat clumsy.

Man, I have to stop thinking about work at home.

It was time to eat. Sangmin hummed as he placed the soybean-paste stew on the table in his living room. It was normal for him to eat alone while watching TV. The dining table was too big and lonesome to use by himself.

Beep.

He pressed the remote control as he took a seat. The news was on.

“We’ve just received breaking news.”

One of the few good things about being single was that he didn’t have to fight anyone over what to watch. The TV was basically fixed on one channel.

Sangmin scooped up some rice with his spoon as he watched the screen mounted on the wall.

“…a suspicious explosion at the Hunter Command Center building in Washington, DC, has shocked the nation. Unconfirmed reports indicate fighting among S-rank hunters as the cause…”

“Huh…… That’s ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.” He shook his head at the unfortunate news as he listened to the broadcast while carefully selecting which side dish was to be his first bite. There weren’t many to choose from, though.

The first has to be kimchi.

“…CCTV footage from near the Command Center shows a crack suddenly appearing on the side of the building and…”

It didn’t matter what the news anchor said. Sangmin was completely focused on putting a piece of cool kimchi from the kimchi fridge on

some steaming rice. As he was finally about to take a bite, his phone rang loudly.

Oh, come on! Who is it now?

Sangmin grumbled as he grabbed his phone, but he rushed to answer it when he saw the caller ID.

“This is Sangmin.”

It was Jinwoo. Sangmin was happy to answer the call, but his expression slowly changed to bewilderment as he processed what Jinwoo was asking.

“Excuse me? You want to watch the training of the new recruits?”

5
THE PLUCKY HIGH SCHOOL GIRL

5
THE PLUCKY HIGH SCHOOL GIRL

That's done.

Jinwoo hung up the phone.

At first, Sangmin hadn't known what to make of the request, but he'd been fully willing to comply after hearing Jinwoo's explanation. Thus, Jinwoo would be able to observe the White Tiger Guild's newest trainees raid a dungeon.

I've also borrowed a car.

Jinho had taken time out of his busy day to bring the van around. He'd apologized for having to head back right away to wherever he'd come from. As Jinwoo watched him leave, the thought crossed his mind that Jinho was a genuinely commendable person.

With that, all the preparations were complete.

Jinwoo currently stood outside the apartment complex of the student in question.

It's not far from our place.

Two minutes' walk. Just a stone's throw away.

He took a look around the block. It was a small neighborhood where old buildings crowded up against one another. Obviously, her family didn't come from money, either.

He definitely understood why the girl was excited about being a hunter. He'd been there, done that.

People like her are always the first casualties.

He'd been injured more than a few times. There were even several near-death experiences. If it wasn't for his mother's illness, he wouldn't have taken this job to begin with.

A dungeon was a very cruel place for an E-rank hunter. If he just let the girl be, she would regret becoming a hunter, or she might get killed before she had the chance.

That's pretty common, unfortunately.

Tens of hunters got hurt or worse every day. Jinwoo couldn't help all of them, nor did he have reason to. They'd each made their own choices.

But…

Once he'd heard who she was, he knew he couldn't stand idly by and do nothing. The name was familiar to him.

Jinwoo sensed a presence and looked up to see the little troublemaker walking toward him. Her hair was in a bun, and there was a spark of attitude in her eyes.

It was her.

"Huh?"

The high schooler blinked at him. "What are you doing here, mister?"

They instantly recognized each other.

Small world, indeed.

He scratched the side of his head. The high school girl who wanted to be a hunter. She was also the only female member and minor in Jinho's strike squad; she'd been the one Jinwoo had been worried about working with.

“Is it okay to work with minors?”

“I consulted an adviser, and there shouldn’t be a problem, legally speaking. No one hires minors because of potential issues if there’s an incident.”

Songyi Han.

So many emotions had run through his mind when he heard the homeroom teacher utter her name. To be sure, Jinwoo had looked into the matter. She’d started skipping school around the same time Jinho’s strike squad started doing raids. At this point, it was hard for him to maintain that it was none of his business. He felt some kind of responsibility. He had played a part in giving her false hope by paying her so much money, even though she was still a student.

There’s one thing I know for sure.

He’d be racked with guilt if he ever heard she got killed in a dungeon for whatever reason. There was no need to lose any sleep over her later if he could talk to her now. For that reason, he’d decided to spend some time with her today. It wasn’t like it was that hard.

“What’re you doing here?” Songyi stared wide-eyed at Jinwoo. She suddenly grew astonished. “Are you the hunter my teacher wanted me to meet, mister?”

The “mister” thing didn’t sit well with him, but he smiled and nodded anyway.

“I don’t know what my teacher told you, but I’m not interested in going to school anymore. And I have no intention of quitting hunting.”

Songyi was adamant. She was quiet when she was with the squad, but her attitude shifted when it was about her. She was just like every kid her age with their clear worldview.

The thing is, I have my own kid with her own worldview back home.

Jinwoo put on a big smile.

Songyi faltered, not knowing what to make of his reaction.

He spoke to her calmly.

“I didn’t come here to tell you to quit.”

She was caught off guard again. “What?”

Kids like Songyi went in harder when ordered to stop. Jinwoo had never intended to reason with her. What he needed to do was show her the reality.

Because I was the same way.

He’d come to this realization during his own first raid. The reality of hunting was much crueler than he’d expected.

Songyi tried her best not to show her confusion. “Th-then why are you here?”

Jinwoo moved closer to her. She flinched and was going to take a step back but stopped herself, as she didn’t want him to think he’d intimidated her.

Jinwoo stood in front of her and, without realizing, gave her a wicked grin. “I’m here to make you a great hunter.”

* * *

Jinwoo didn’t have to twist Songyi’s arm to get her to go with him to a dungeon.

When he told her there was an opportunity to watch the newest members of the great White Tiger Guild training, she immediately agreed to tag along.

She didn’t seem to suspect that Jinwoo was up to something.

When she asked how he knew her teacher, he showed her a picture of himself with Jinah.

“Are you really Jinah’s older brother, mister?”

“……”

That word still bugged him for some reason, but he let it slide, since everything was going according to plan.

“Hop in.”

“Thank you!”

Jinwoo took Songyi to where the White Tiger Guild rookies were planning to do some nighttime training. He was told they’d start at nine, so there was plenty of time to get there.

Vroooooom.

The black van that was far too big for just two passengers seemed to drift around a bend. Were his agility and perception stats responsible for this? Even though he hadn’t driven since he’d first gotten his driver’s license, Jinwoo found it easy to maneuver the vehicle. Whenever he focused, the other cars started to remind him of snails.

These stats are quite versatile.

Sitting in the passenger seat, Songyi asked, “Does Jinah really study all the time at home, too? Rumor has it, she put up pages of an English dictionary as her bedroom wallpaper so she can study even as she falls asleep.”

Was there really a rumor like that about her? To Jinwoo, she was just a sleepyhead who loved fried chicken.

“Jinah is just like you. When she comes home, she plays games, eats, and sleeps.”

Though the majority of the time, she sleeps.

“No way…… Then how are her grades so good?”

“I have no idea, either. When she was in middle school, she used to go to the arcade all the time with me.”

They continued their conversation until they arrived near the gate. Jinwoo parked the car.

Skrrrch.

This specific neighborhood had been designated as a concentrated area for gates. It was easy to find parking because so many residents had moved out. Jinwoo had heard somewhere that around 80 percent of the houses had been abandoned. There was also talk of the whole place being leveled once the remaining residents left.

Tmp, tmp.

Jinwoo and Songyi got out of the van. There was a sense of foreboding permeating the air.

Wooooo…

Jinwoo thought he heard cheering coming from the shadow beneath his feet. Was that all in his head?

Songyi looked frightened by the spooky surroundings until she saw other hunters gathered in the distance. Her eyes twinkled as if she’d spotted celebrities.

After all, they’re hunters with the White Tiger Guild.

To a student who admired hunters, they were basically rock stars, weren’t they? Considering how hunters were portrayed on TV, that was an apt description.

“Oh, you really did come.” Kichul saw Jinwoo and beelined straight for him. “Do you remember me?”

Jinwoo nodded lightly.

Since Kichul's smile was genuine, rather than something to be used for a sales pitch, Jinwoo smiled back. He'd interacted with Kichul only a few times, but he seemed like a nice guy.

"Manager An told me everything. Oh, is this the student?"

"Hello." Songyi bowed.

As they exchanged greetings, a big, muscular man approached and snapped at them.

"Enough small talk—let's go! We're not here for a picnic, and it's already nine o'clock."

He returned to the gate without waiting for a response. He had a strong presence about him.

Jinwoo turned to Kichul. "Who is he?"

"Oh, he's a new A-rank member, but he wasn't too happy about someone observing the training. He said a dungeon isn't a playground."

"He's an A rank?"

Kichul nodded. A prideful A rank would act like that.

Jinwoo had another question. "What's the level of the strike squad today?"

"One A rank, seven B ranks, and four C ranks, so twelve in total."

"A- and B-rank hunters to raid a C-rank dungeon…?"

"High ranks aside, a newbie is still a newbie. This is for them to gain dungeon experience." Kichul spoke proudly. He added that they would be assigned to high-level dungeons immediately after this one training session, because they were that powerful.

Sure, but an A rank and seven B ranks still seems excessive.

Jinwoo's gaze changed.

There was only one reason Sangmin had okayed this. He was showing off the White Tiger Guild's excellent new recruits in hopes of changing Jinwoo's mind. Contrary to Sangmin's and Kichul's expectations, though, Jinwoo looked at the gate with disappointment.

It was a C-rank gate. Compared to the gate's level, the members were overpowered.

If the raid goes too smoothly, my plan won't work.

This was his biggest concern. He tried to tell himself things would work out.

She'll figure it out herself.

She just had to understand how useless an E-rank hunter would be in a dungeon, that was all.

"When are we going in?" Unaware of Jinwoo's ulterior motive, Songyi was nagging him to head inside.

He looked at her sideways and saw she was flush with excitement.

Let's see how long she'll stay excited.

Jinwoo swallowed his laugh as he spoke to Kichul. "We're going in, too."

"Oh, yes." Kichul looked around before whispering to Jinwoo.

Psst, psst.

"Uh, Hunter Sung, if you participate in the raid, it'll end too quickly. So please just watch."

The purpose of the visit was to observe the training, so that was a redundant request.

"Of course."

He was going to hit a bunch of C-rank dungeons with Jinho tomorrow anyway, so no need to interfere with the White Tiger Guild's training. He was planning to bring out his shadow army in the dungeons with Jinho, so that was why he'd brought Songyi all the way here.

I don't want to bust out my shadow soldiers in front of her.

If Songyi saw how easily Jinwoo could defeat magic beasts using his shadow soldiers, her delusions of hunter grandeur would only swell.

The two walked to the front of the gate together. Unlike the A-rank hunter they'd met earlier, the others welcomed them.

"Hello."

"Nice to meet you."

Since this raid wasn't about the money, the more hunters there were, the better. As was the custom, they took turns introducing themselves. When it was the A-rank hunter's turn, however…

"Pass."

…and inside the gate he went.

"We should go in, too."

The White Tiger Guild trainees entered the gate one by one. Songyi looked back at Jinwoo right before she went in.

"How about you, mister?"

Jinwoo crossed his arms and replied, "You first."

She looked nervous but nodded and ran in.

Hmm.

Jinwoo gave a small sigh as he stood before the gate. He sensed someone was watching him and looked over to see Kichul waving and cheering him on.

……

He turned back to the gate.

Wait.

……?

Its surface continued to vibrate and ripple.

The gate is supposed to stop moving and look like a black membrane when no one is passing through it.

But this one continued to undulate like waves. There was something different about it.

Jinwoo tapped the gate with his finger.

Shloop.

The surface was a sticky goo. It stuck to his finger and stretched like gum as he pulled back.

It can't be……

Jinwoo whipped around, and he and Kichul exchanged urgent looks. Kichul could also tell that something had gone wrong.

Jinwoo shouted, "Call your main strike squad—now!"

Before he could say any more, Jinwoo was sucked into the gate.

"Wh-what was that?"

"A-A-Assistant Manager?"

Kichul ran toward the gate. Three more White Tiger employees rushed after him.

Kichul stood in front of the gate, looking dumbfounded. "N-n-no way!"

The hunters weren't the only newbies. He'd also brought new office staffers for training purposes. Of course, none of them was familiar with this kind of phenomenon.

The other staffers looked at Kichul, the panic clear on their faces.

“Assistant Manager Hyun! The surface of the gate is turning red!”

The red color spread outward like someone had spilled a drop of blood on the surface.

Kichul ignored the others and hurriedly made a call.

Click.

“Yes, Kichul?”

“Sir! It’s a red gate! The gate the trainees entered just transformed into a red gate!”

“What?”

Sangmin’s tone became aggressive.

“What the hell are you talking about? How can a red gate spawn from a C-rank one?”

Kichul looked back to see that the gate was entirely red now. The rippling on the surface had slowed.

He swallowed hard. “I’m not sure, either…… But it’s definitely a red gate, sir.”

“What?!”

6

The Red Gate

6
THE RED GATE

“What do you mean, a red gate?”

Yoonho Baek, president of the White Tiger Guild, had rushed to the site as soon as he received the news.

Kichul, the man in charge of trainees, looked ashen. “Sir, it’s……”

“I need to see for myself.”

President Baek breezed past the employees in front of the gate, who were standing gravely, as if attending a funeral.

It’s really a red gate!

His expression turned grim.

What was a red gate? It was a dangerous connection to the other world, which hunters could escape only by either killing the boss or waiting for a dungeon break to occur. Once a hunter went inside, that was it. The red gate would block out all external forces. It would be impossible to enter or exit.

The president touched the surface of the gate. It was, as he suspected, rock-hard.

This is not good.

No matter what they did, they wouldn't be able to help the hunters on the inside.

He barked at Kichul. "Wasn't this supposed to be a C-rank gate?"

"It was, sir."

"Did you have the association confirm?"

"Yes, but……they insisted it was a C-rank gate……"

"Those sons of bitches!" Yoonho spat out curses.

A red gate could spawn only from higher-rank dungeons. The portals linked their world to another, so considering how much mana would've been flowing from the gate, it was impossible for it to have been measured as merely a C-rank dungeon. This particular one was at least a B rank. Worst-case scenario, it was an A rank or even higher.

And yet the association wouldn't admit they'd messed up?

Kichul asked, "Sir, should we measure the gate again with our own mana meter?"

President Baek shook his head. "Red gates are sealed tight, so it'd be impossible to calibrate."

There was no way to fine-tune the reading, so it was impossible to determine the actual rank of the problematic gate.

Besides, there were more important things to worry about than the rank.

"How many of our members are inside?"

"Twelve, sir."

"How many of them are high-rank hunters?"

"The leader is Hunter Chul Kim, A rank, and with him are seven B-rank hunters."

“One A-rank and seven B-rank hunters……”

“The new recruits…… Will they be okay?”

The president shook his head again. “Consider them all dead. If they’re lucky, two or three of the A and/or B ranks might make it out alive.”

But only if they were lucky. The odds were not in their favor. The hunters who’d gone in could barely clear a B-rank dungeon of the lowest difficulty. Anything beyond that would be too much for them. Barring any miracles, those trainees had zero chance of survival.

Baek looked very worried.

Kichul eyed the president and carefully spoke. “Um, one more thing, sir…… Another person went in with the new recruits.”

The president raised his head. What were the chances of it being a high-rank hunter who happened to be passing by and went in with them because he was curious about the training? Miracles could happen. This would truly be a miracle!

His voice got louder. “Who was it?”

“It’s the hunter I’ve been keeping an eye on lately, sir.”

The response came from somewhere behind them. Yoonho and Kichul turned around at the same time to see Sangmin breathing heavily and sweating profusely.

“Apologies for my tardiness. There was a traffic jam…” Sangmin had arrived last, as he lived the farthest away.

Sangmin glanced at the red gate. It looked like the entrance to an iron fortress. He felt suffocated just staring at it.

But if it’s Jinwoo Sung……

Jinwoo might be the game changer, defying the dire predictions being made here the way he'd defied fate so many times before. That was Sangmin's vague hope.

Yoonho urgently approached him. "The hunter you've been personally monitoring, Manager An?"

"That's right, sir."

Ah, yes. Yoonho recalled hearing about this.

Thinking about it……

He'd heard Manager An had been quite busy these days. He'd been aiming for a particular hunter. Manager An had a knack for discovering exceptional talent.

Could that hunter be……?

There was a glimmer of hope.

"What's his rank? A? Or B?"

If he was an S-rank hunter, there was no way Yoonho wouldn't already know about him. There were barely ten S-rank hunters in all of Korea. But Sangmin shook his head.

Oh my God!

Baek's face began to relax. "Then an S-rank hunter went in there?"

Sangmin replied calmly. "No, sir, he's an E-rank."

Baek looked like he'd swallowed a lemon.

* * *

Jinwoo was taken aback.

Does this gate lead to the other world?

This was his first time experiencing it for himself, but he'd read about other people's experiences online. They all described it as feeling like they were "sucked into" the gate. Jinwoo thought it was an apt way to put it.

Once inside, he was surrounded by darkness, and it felt like he was sliding somewhere unknown.

Huh!

When he opened his eyes, he found himself standing in the middle of a snow-covered forest.

"Where are we?"

"This isn't the inside of the dungeon, is it?"

"The gate is gone!"

The hunters couldn't hide their bewilderment as they looked around. While everyone else was dumbstruck, Jinwoo narrowed his eyes and scanned the area.

I don't sense anything out of the ordinary.

Thanks to his training from the system, he was able to keep calm despite being thrust into a strange environment.

The first thing he noted were the trees. They were coniferous, rarely found in Korea, and grouped together tightly as they stretched up to the sky. He noted that the snow atop the trees could be dangerous if it fell, before looking back down and making eye contact with someone.

It was Chul Kim, the A-rank hunter who, like Jinwoo, was also warily scanning the area.

……

……

They sized each other up and eventually turned away.

In the meantime, Songyi had come over to Jinwoo and was tugging at his clothes. “Um… Something went wrong, right?”

She was frightened, and her attitude and fake confidence were nowhere to be found.

Jinwoo suddenly reached for her face.

……?

This startled Songyi.

Tup.

Jinwoo snatched an arrow out of the air, and it quivered as if angry that it had missed its target…which would have been right between Songyi’s eyes.

“Ah! Ahhh…” Her face went pale as soon as she realized what had just happened.

A scream erupted from elsewhere.

“Eeeeek!”

“Aaargh!”

Whump.

A male hunter struck in the forehead by an arrow fell to the ground. Blood spilled over his eyes and out of his mouth.

“Ah…ah…” Some of the hunters began sobbing.

The arrow had been shot simultaneously with the one aimed at Songyi. Thanks to this, no one else had seen Jinwoo catch the arrow mid-flight.

“Over there!”

“It’s those bastards!”

One of the B-rank hunters motioned to the top of a tree quite a distance from where they were. Before he even pointed it out, Jinwoo's and Chul's eyes were already trained on the spot.

Two people were standing there.

Two people. Or should I say two creatures?

They had white hair and skin, with silver eyes. Their kind also had a unique feature: pointy ears. These magic beasts were well-known for their beauty and rarity, as well as the fact that they could be encountered only in higher level dungeons.

Ice elves.

Otherwise known as Ice Slayers. People who had never run into them referred to them as ice elves, but anyone who'd ever fought them called them Ice Slayers. The latter group often added that a pretty name like *elf* didn't suit the bastards.

Jinwoo immediately understood why experienced hunters held so much contempt for Ice Slayers.

……They're smiling.

The two creatures lowered their bows and smiled eerily at the hunters. They seemed like they were standing before a grand buffet, trying to decide what to eat first.

And what was your decision?

Jinwoo frowned in thought. One arrow had been aimed to the group's far left and the other to the far right. That was not random. The hunter struck down by the arrow was a man in his thirties who had awakened as a C rank not too long ago. Other than Songyi, he was the weakest of the bunch. And the other arrow…

It targeted Songyi.

They had gone after the two weakest members.

If it wasn't for the system, I'd be the one with an arrow in my head.

Jinwoo was put off by the Ice Slayers' superficial moves. He lifted the arrow above his head so the Ice Slayers could see it and broke it in two.

Crack!

Viewing this as a challenge, the archer who had fired that arrow gestured that he would slit Jinwoo's throat.

Ha! Jinwoo had to laugh, but his eyes were deadly serious.

……I'm going to kill you with my own hands.

Jinwoo responded to the threat with an icy glare. Soon, the Ice Slayers disappeared down the tree.

"Guess that was the welcoming party." Finally, Chul spoke up. Since he was the only A-rank hunter in the group, everyone looked at him as the de facto leader. He was the designated leader of this strike squad anyway.

"As some of you may have already figured out, we're inside a red gate." Chul didn't bother to mince his words, which came off a little arrogant. Of course, no one complained.

"That means we'll all die, or they'll come to help us once the gate expires and there's a dungeon break."

The group was despondent.

"Ugh."

"Haaah……"

The fact that they couldn't count on being rescued came as a big shock.

Chul continued. “If we stay here, we’ll either freeze to death or get killed by those ice bastards. I’m going to clear this dungeon and get out, even if I have to do it myself. Will anyone join me?”

People tended to trust Chul because of his wide shoulders and strong gaze. The hunters exchanged looks before deciding to go with him.

“Let’s stay together.”

“I’m in.”

“Let’s get out of here alive.”

“I’ll help, too!”

But Chul shoved the last hunter in the chest when he approached, saying he wanted to help.

“Oof!”

Chul had kept his strength in check, but strength as an A rank was just that high.

The other hunter stumbled back, wincing at the pain.

“Not you.”

“Huh?”

“Or you, you, you, or you, either.”

Chul was pointing to a few more people, including the man. Jinwoo and Songyi were among the ones he indicated.

Jinwoo’s eyebrow twitched. He had singled out five hunters in total. All were C rank or lower.

“Sorry, but I can’t have you tagging along.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you know anything about red gates?”

The other man shook his head.

“One hour outside the gate is a whole day in here. Worst-case scenario, it’ll be several months in here before a dungeon break or I defeat the boss. I don’t need the excess baggage.”

“We’re just baggage to you?” The hunters singled out by Chul were pissed, but they all went quiet when he glowered at them.

He spoke as if he were doing them a favor. “Don’t get too upset. If you can stay alive until we kill the boss, then everyone gets to go home.”

“But still……”

The rejected hunters turned desperately to the ones Chul was taking with him, but none of them did anything. They were too busy avoiding eye contact.

That was when…

“Excuse me.”

A female B-rank hunter on Chul’s team raised her hand.

……?

When Chul looked at her, she pointed at Jinwoo.

“Can I switch to their side?”

“……Up to you.”

She walked over to Jinwoo without a moment’s hesitation.

Chul looked back and forth between her and Jinwoo and then sneered. “Since we have a spot available, I’ll take one more.”

“Me! Me!” The male hunter who had been shoved by Chul quickly ran forward before changing his mind.

That was a normal reaction Jinwoo could understand.

This woman is weird.

He looked over at her suspiciously. The female hunter met his gaze and whispered quietly to him.

“That Chul guy didn’t even see those arrows coming.”

Even if a person was a high-rank hunter, it didn’t mean all their stats were equally high. Even an A-rank hunter could have low agility. Since Jinwoo understood the concept of stats, her comment didn’t strike him as anything strange.

“Yeah, so?”

She grinned from ear to ear. “You… You’re not E rank, are you?”

* * *

Outside the red gate, President Baek’s expression was dark. Even though Sangmin had briefed him about Jinwoo, he still felt uneasy.

“This is only speculation?”

“That’s right, sir.” Sangmin had to admit it. Nothing had been definitively proven about Jinwoo.

If the president personally met Hunter Sung, he’d understand.

There was something about Jinwoo that was different. Sangmin was frustrated by his inability to explain himself.

Yoonho turned back to the gate. “Then we only have Chul to rely on……”

Just then…

“This shouldn’t be a problem for Chul.”

One more person joined their group. All three turned toward the newcomer. It was Sungchan Ju, the department manager of the first administration team.

He spoke confidently. “I’ve thoroughly trained Hunter Kim to be prepared for every possible contingency.”

Ordinarily, the second administration team was in charge of training new hunters, but the first administration team had jurisdiction over training awakened beings who were A rank or higher. Those selected for the elite strike squad took a different route.

Sungchan’s confidence allowed the president’s features to smooth slightly. “How were Chul’s results?”

“Excellent, sir. His combat abilities alone were as good as the current members of the elite strike squad.”

“Really?” Yoonho finally had his smile back.

Chul was an A-rank hunter and the type of talent who stood out among his peers. Perhaps he could successfully lead the B-rank hunters and clear the dungeon! Casualties among the C-rank hunters were to be expected, but the survival of the high-rank hunters was more important to the White Tiger Guild.

Fortunately, Chul seems to be among the best of the best……

The flame of hope, once dead, now sparked again.

After managing to reassure the president, Sungchan now raised an eyebrow at Sangmin. “You were saying something about an E-rank hunter who has potentially reawakened…?”

He scoffed at the idea. “Our man Chul is much more reliable than some hunter we can’t really count on.”

Sangmin clenched his jaw at the condescension, but he didn’t see a need to raise his voice or get angry.

We’ll see who’s right in the end……

All four men turned in unison toward the red gate, where their hunters were being held captive.

Hwooooo…

The crimson color of the gate seemed even more ominous today.

* * *

“You… You’re not E rank, are you?”

It was a daring question.

Jinwoo replied, “Then let me also ask you something.”

“Sure.”

He looked toward Chul and the hunters gathered around him. They were discussing strategy before heading out.

“How are you rookies so calm, considering the situation?”

“The first thing trainees are taught is to expect the unexpected in a dungeon.”

Anything could happen in a dungeon. Jinwoo knew this better than anyone here.

“We’ve all been trained well, especially that guy Chul. He was being groomed for the White Tiger’s elite strike squad.”

Their training kept their fear in check. Jinwoo thought this was absolutely absurd and realized with a start that they were no different from Songyi. She claimed they were prepared, but were they really? They could brag about their training all they liked, but they had no idea how terrifying dungeons could actually be.

Knowing something and experiencing something are two very different things.

A dungeon could easily shake one’s confidence, and all it would take was a small crack for everything to fall apart. It took time to build up a wall but only seconds to break it down. Jinwoo could predict what

was in store for Chul's team. They looked tough on the outside, but they were beginners nonetheless.

"You still haven't answered me."

"Excuse me?" Jinwoo looked to the woman.

"I asked you a question."

About whether he was an E rank. She was more tenacious than he thought.

"Why do I have to answer you?" He was blunt, but in her mind, Heejin Park considered it a victory. She'd been around the block enough times to know what his reaction meant.

He was self-assured.

I knew I wasn't seeing things!

And there was another reason she was sure about him. While training with the White Tiger Guild, she had witnessed how a lot of high-rank hunters moved. But Jinwoo's hand earlier… She had never seen anyone move as fast as he did.

I was barely able to make out what happened with my own eyes.

She was an athlete who had awakened as a combat hunter, so she was confident with what she could do physically.

Heejin's eyes sparkled.

This man is at least A rank.

No, maybe even…… She asked again to try and extract the answer she wanted. "Come on. Can't you please just tell me?"

"It's none of your business."

That was enough small talk. Jinwoo turned away. He was done with the third degree, and anyway, Chul was approaching them.

Chul and Jinwoo looked each other over.

“We’re going”—Chul’s voice was very deep and gravelly, so he sounded threatening no matter what his intentions were—“down that path.”

He wasn’t simply reporting his team’s itinerary. His expression made it clear he was asking Jinwoo what his plan was, as well as issuing a veiled threat to not follow them.

……

Jinwoo had a look around before turning back to him. “We’ll be going toward the forest.”

“……Good luck.”

Chul’s team was the one that would need luck, but Jinwoo kept his thoughts to himself.

“You too.”

Jinwoo’s team started heading into the forest. As soon as they were out of his line of sight, Chul burst out laughing. “Morons.”

“Pardon?”

“Look over there.”

Chul uncrossed his arms and gestured at the trees. Everywhere he pointed, there were claw marks on the trunks, clearly made by some large animal.

“Th-those are……!”

“Bears.”

“Ice bears!”

Among animal-type magic beasts, bearlike magic beasts were especially dangerous. Those claw marks were their way of marking their territory.

The hunters on Chul’s team shook their heads.

“Tsk, tsk.”

“They would’ve been better off waiting for us here.”

“The E-rank hunter just led innocent people to their deaths.”

“Is he even properly trained?”

Chul laughed derisively in the direction of the woods.

What do you expect from an E-rank hunter?

……Wait a minute. His grin was suddenly wiped away.

Most of that group were C rank, and there was one B-rank hunter with them……

So why did Chul assume that Jinwoo was the leader? He hadn’t considered anything wrong or even odd about that until now. He shrugged it off.

So what……?

Jinwoo was a dead man walking anyway. He should be thinking about his own neck instead of those weaklings with no chance of survival. It was unfortunate that anyone had to die, but shouldn’t the living keep on living?

Chul roared at his group. “Let’s move!”

* * *

Jinwoo led the way, but Heejin soon moved to block his path.

“What’re you doing?”

“Are you crazy?”

Jinwoo crossed his arms, his expression making it clear he wasn’t impressed. It was a warning to choose her next words wisely.

She quieted down as if she'd gotten the message. "I'm sorry, but I really need to say this." Heejin pointed at one of the nearby trees. "Do you see that?"

There were huge claw marks gouged into a tree trunk.

"And there! And over there, too!"

It was difficult to find a tree without any claw marks or significant damage.

"Those are all signs of bears marking this whole place as their territory! This forest is filled with bear-type magic beasts!"

Dogs and monkeys are weaker than tigers or lions. Magic beasts worked the same way. Tiger- or lion-type magic beasts were more powerful than dog- or monkey-type magic beasts. So what about bears? Bears, especially polar bears, were among the strongest carnivorous animals around. Jinwoo's team had walked right into the territory of magic beasts reminiscent of that terrifying animal.

No wonder she was so heated. "We need to turn back right now! Before the magic beasts come after us!"

Tsk. Jinwoo clicked his tongue.

What?

Heejin had expected Jinwoo to react either by getting mad, being shocked, or accepting the facts. All her guesses were wrong, though. She was giving him solid advice, yet he regarded her as if she were an idiot.

Why…? Why is he looking at me like that?

Heejin's face turned red from embarrassment. "Wh-what?" Her voice had risen again.

Jinwoo sighed before explaining. "It's hard to find an unmarked tree, which means there's more than one or two ice bears here."

“Th-that’s why we need to go ba—”

“That’s why we’re going into the forest.”

“What?”

Heejin blinked, perplexed.

She still doesn’t get it.

Jinwoo had no choice but to spell it out. “While we’re making our way through the woods, all we have to worry about are ice bears.”

“Oh!” She finally understood what he was trying to say.

The presence of so many ice bears meant that there were no predators stronger than them in this forest, which in turn meant they didn’t have to worry about coming across more powerful magic beasts.

Why didn’t I think of that?

She felt embarrassed about her outburst. Her face and neck flushed, and she hung her head low.

Jinwoo kept his disapproval to himself.

The unknown is what makes dungeons so frightening. No one could prepare for an unknown enemy, after all. But here, their opponents were clear.

Bear-type magic beasts.

He didn’t know how strong ice bears were, but they were definitely weaker than those elves they’d encountered. The elves wore clothes made of bearskin. That’s why he had chosen the forest. Jinwoo planned to level up in the forest, keeping an eye on Chul’s team as well as the Ice Slayers, while waiting for the right time to make a move.

This was the safest course of action.

……?

Something caught his eye. “Why is your face so red?”

Heejin’s face was abnormally beet colored. She could barely raise her head to speak in a tiny voice. “B-because I’m cold…”

“Haah…” Jinwoo gave a long sigh before calling up the shop and picking out thick fur jackets and winter shoes from the list of items for purchase.

Ping!

[ITEM: WARM FUR JACKET]
Acquisition Difficulty: None

Category: Miscellaneous

Provides warmth to the body when worn.

Price: 10 gold

[ITEM: WARM BOOTS]
Acquisition Difficulty: None

Category: Miscellaneous

Provides warmth to the feet when worn.

Price: 10 gold

A fur jacket and a pair of boots only cost ten gold each.

Unlike items with buffs and debuffs, miscellaneous items were inexpensive. Compared to how much gold he had, they were dirt cheap.

[Balance: 431,930 gold]

Though I can’t believe I have to spend my gold on these kinds of things……

Jinwoo bought the items. Since he couldn't discriminate, he bought enough for all five members of the party and spent one hundred gold.

Hwoom.

Five coats and five pairs of boots appeared at Jinwoo's feet. Everyone besides him looked like their eyes would pop out of their heads.

"Whoa!"

"Wh-what? Spatial magic?"

Even Heejin was so surprised, she managed to raise her head.

Jinwoo said coolly, "Please help yourselves."

As he reached for the closest fur jacket, Songyi suddenly grabbed his sleeve.

……?

Their eyes met, and eventually, Songyi was able to get out the words. "Wh-what exactly are you, mister? You caught an arrow earlier, and now you used some kind of strange magic to get these clothes."

Jinwoo made a face. It was obvious they'd start asking questions relentlessly, and things would get troublesome if they continued like this.

Okay, this is where I need to draw a line.

He spoke firmly. "I brought you here, so I promise to take responsibility and protect you, but…" He lowered his voice. "Do not ask me any questions."

He looked at Heejin and the other hunters in turn. "This goes for all of you. No questions, no demands."

And finally… "If you don't like it, you can leave. I won't stop you."

The other two male hunters who had initially followed willingly because of the B-rank Heejin looked back and forth between Jinwoo and the fur jackets they were about to put on before shaking their heads hard.

* * *

There was one more reason why Jinwoo had chosen the forest.

Stats.

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Class: Shadow Monarch]

[Level: 51]

[Title: The One Who Overcame Adversity (and 1 other)]

Careful not to alert the others in any way, Jinwoo called up the stat window and changed his title from The One Who Overcame Adversity to Wolf Assassin.

[TITLE: WOLF ASSASSIN (AND 1 OTHER)]
A title given to those skilled at hunting wolves. When battling an animal-type monster, all abilities will increase by 40 percent.

The buff was perfect for his current situation, so why not take advantage of it?

Ping!

[An animal-type monster has appeared.]

[The title buff has been applied.]

Jinwoo grinned at the confirmation message.

Perfect.

That was when the other hunters started screaming.

“I-it’s a bear!”

“Ice bear!”

An ice bear had picked up their scent and was now lumbering toward them. Strangers had invaded its territory, and the ice bear did not look kindly on intruders.

Grrrr.

It bared its translucent, icelike teeth and slowly rose up on its hind legs. Its enormous body was all the hunters could see.

“Ahhh……”

It resembled a polar bear but was twice as big, and embedded in the middle of its chest was an essence stone, like an emblem signaling that it was a magic beast.

Grrraaahhh!

Its loud roar shook the entire area, and everyone except Jinwoo froze in terror.

Heejin scowled.

How is only having to worry about ice bears a good thing?!

How could anyone say that after seeing this creature? She’d almost fallen for Jinwoo’s BS, but as soon as she caught sight of the magic beast, she was certain she’d been right all along.

We shouldn’t have come into the forest!

Sensing the impending danger, Heejin got in front of the group and yelled at them. “I’m going to draw its attention, so you guys— Agh!”

Someone forcefully tugged at Heejin’s clothes, and she had to stagger backward to stay on her feet. By the time she regained her balance, Jinwoo was standing in front of her.

“What’re you doing?!”

Jinwoo stabbed his finger at her. “Listen to me loud and clear. *I’ll* deal with the magic beasts.”

He didn’t want to lose out on any experience points. These teddy bears were going to help him level up before he had to deal with the real enemies, the Ice Slayers.

“What?!” Heejin couldn’t hide her exasperation.

He pulled me back just so he could kill the magic beasts by himself?

The two mage hunters also stopped casting, completely dumbfounded.

“I don’t care how strong you think you are—that is a magic beast in a high-rank dungeon!”

Ignoring Heejin’s irate voice coming from behind him, Jinwoo walked toward the bear.

If I use a dagger…

It would get too messy with blood spraying all over the place. He’d pulled his daggers out of reflex, but he put them back into his inventory. He clenched his fists instead.

I was only supposed to observe, but I’m sure they’ll understand, since this is an emergency situation.

Jinwoo locked eyes with the ice bear.

Grawr!

Despite being as thick as a telephone pole, the ice bear’s foreleg was lightning quick.

Shwik!

But all it struck was air.

It's huge but also fast.

Jinwoo understood why these creatures were infamous as he leaped above it.

Still……

All his leveling-up had not been in vain. Before the bear could raise its head, Jinwoo struck down on its forehead with all his might.

Wham!

The bear's head slammed into the ground. With its skull smashed in and its long tongue trailing out the side of its mouth, it lay there lifeless.

[You have leveled up!]

There it was! Jinwoo had expected to level up this time around, so it was a good thing he'd stopped Heejin.

"Wh-what in the world are you…?"

Jinwoo turned around at that shaky voice and took in the faces of the four speechless hunters.

Jinwoo exhaled.

I told them no questions in advance exactly because I wanted to avoid this.

But temporary memory loss during a shocking experience was to be expected. Jinwoo had no choice but to repeat himself forcefully.

"I said *no* questions. If you don't like my way, the exit"—Jinwoo pointed in the direction Chul's team had gone—"is back there."

Heejin had gotten herself together in the meantime. "I just saw how you killed that bear. Do you really think I'd leave you now?"

She was overwhelmed. She'd gone with her gut in choosing Jinwoo over Chul, thinking he was the better choice, but only now did she

realize she'd hit the nail on the head. Heejin had a good sense for self-preservation, so her decision had come quickly. She knew the smartest thing to do would be to follow Jinwoo if she wanted to get out of there alive.

Just in case he was thinking of abandoning them, she frantically said, "Please be our party leader, Jinwoo. We'll do whatever you say."

I did say no demands, but……

He thought about it for a second, then readily agreed. Thinking ahead, he realized this might be a convenient arrangement.

Heejin looked back at the others. Since Songyi had arrived with Jinwoo, Heejin didn't need to ask her opinion on the matter, but that left two people.

"You're good with this, right?"

With all eyes on them, the two hunters glanced between the ice bear's carcass and Jinwoo, then nodded vigorously.

* * *

Outside the red gate, Kichul checked his watch while wiping the cold sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.

President Baek turned to him. "How long has it been?"

"About three hours, sir."

"Three hours… That means three days have already passed inside the dungeon."

President Baek's voice was heavy. Among the four of them, he was the only one with firsthand experience being on the other side of a red gate. He was Yoonho Baek, one of the S-rank hunters who represented Korea. But even for him, a red gate wasn't easy to deal with.

Yoonho recalled his memories of that time with mixed feelings. “The scariest part of a red gate is that you never know what’ll be on the other side.”

S-rank hunters rarely spoke of their experiences inside a red gate, so Sangmin, Sungchan, and Kichul were completely focused on him.

The president continued. “The place beyond the gate could be a desert with temperatures of over sixty degrees Celsius, the heart of a jungle filled with poisonous snakes and insects, or a snowy landscape so cold that you could lose your toes to frostbite.”

Gulp.

The three listeners were hanging on to his every word.

“As you enter, you have no idea whether it’s a red gate, so what preparations could you possibly make?”

Which is precisely what had happened today. The gate had seemed normal, only turning red once the hunters entered.

“Your skin burns from the heat of the sun, poisonous insects relentlessly attack you at all hours, the cold rots your flesh…… That’s how the weakest in the group start dying off.”

“Oh my goodness…,” Kichul whispered in disbelief.

“And in that unforgiving environment, you have to fight magic beasts.”

Just listening to Yoonho, the other three could feel how hopeless the situation was.

However, he had more to add. “But let’s say you’re able to adapt to this new environment. Now you have to find food.”

They’d have to find enough nourishment for a minimum of a few weeks, possibly up to several months. That was no easy task.

“Between the starvation and the grueling environment, the only thing you can trust is a mana compass.”

A mana compass pointed the user toward strong sources of mana. Other than waiting for the gate to expire, the only way out was to use the mana compass to find the boss and defeat it.

“Think about enduring in a place where all your hopes lie solely on the needle of a compass for several days, weeks, or months. That would drive anyone insane.”

The three men nodded. If ordinary people like themselves fell into that kind of environment, they wouldn’t last a day even without the threat of a magic beast.

“We established that three days have passed, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Yoonho’s face fell at Kichul’s response. “It’s likely that all the C- and lower-rank hunters are already dead.”

Chul was an excellent A rank, but even for him, it’d be impossible to protect the entire team. If only they had an S-rank hunter with them.

And yet……

“At this point, we have to pray for the safe return of the high-rank hunters.”

This was his conclusion based on personal experience. In the president’s mind, the low-rank hunters were as good as gone.

* * *

Dinnertime. A big chunk of meat was roasting nicely on a campfire.

“Bear meat’s a little tough, but it’s not bad, eh?”

“Would you like some more?”

“Oh, thank you.”

Myunghwan Ko sliced off some well-done ice-bear meat and put it on the plate held out by Kijoong Yoon.

They were the two C-rank hunters on Jinwoo’s team. Heejin and Songyi were also enjoying the food, though not as much as the other two.

“Heejin, could you pass me the pepper?”

“Some salt, too?”

“No thanks.”

Everyone had adapted to living in the dungeon. They had a campfire, blankets, and even a tent. They didn’t need much else, and it all felt almost cozy.

Myunghwan surveyed the area before speaking up. “Have you noticed that the bear attacks have decreased lately?”

Heejin answered. “It’s probably because the captain is single-handedly making them an endangered species.”

“Yeah, it’s like they’re mortal enemies or something. He gets this crazed look in his eyes whenever he fights a bear. It’s kinda scary.”

Somewhere along the way, they’d started referring to Jinwoo as “Captain.”

Heejin suddenly noticed his absence and craned her neck to try to spot him. “Speaking of our captain, where did he go?”

Kijoong raised his head from where he’d been shoveling food into his mouth. “He took off a while ago, saying he wanted to explore the area.”

Huh. Heejin shook her head in wonder. “He just wanders around as he pleases… Doesn’t he get scared?”

Kijoong grinned. “He can take care of himself.”

Myunghwan snorted. “You’re right. He can kill a freaking ice bear with his bare hands.”

He considered for a bit before continuing. “So…since we’re on the topic… What rank would you have to be before you’re able to kill a massive beast like that with your bare hands?”

Everyone fell silent. They were all equally curious, but no one dared answer that question for fear of getting kicked off the team.

“……Let’s just finish eating.”

Everyone nodded in agreement with Heejin.

* * *

Jinwoo emerged from some bushes as he explored the forest.

It’s here somewhere……

He’d sensed the presence of a group of ice bears nearby. Instead of waiting for them to attack, he had started tracking the beasts last night. He’d come to the realization a while ago that they were all attacking from the same direction.

Jinwoo’s search continued until his eyes lit up.

Gotcha!

Just past some bushes, he spied a large number of caves. He could sense even without using perception that there was at least one ice bear in each. He could clearly see the ice bears entering and exiting the caves. There were roughly thirty or so. It was like a neighborhood of bruins.

He grinned. Jinwoo had intentionally ventured out alone so no one would see him. This was a perfect opportunity to use his shadow soldiers. He’d been waiting for a moment like this.

Come.

As he summoned them with his mind, the armored shadows wordlessly materialized around him.

“Remember, this is your first outing, right?”

Their results here would dictate his impressions of them.

……

……

The shadow soldiers stood silently at attention. *Good.*

Jinwoo smirked.

Sniff, sniff.

The ice bears had caught a whiff of Jinwoo and were starting to emerge from their caves.

They’re also ready on their end……

Jinwoo pointed toward the ice bears.

“Go.”

With that, the shadow soldiers charged forward like they were gliding on ice. Jinwoo’s minions advanced quickly…but the ice bears’ angry paws were even faster.

Fwoosh!

Clang!

A shadow soldier was crushed with one hit. The attack would’ve split apart a human body if there had been one inside the armor.

Hmm……

Jinwoo watched disapprovingly.

Was I expecting too much from them?

The bears' size and strength appeared to be more than the shadow soldiers could handle.

Just then, something unexpected happened.

Whoa!

Jinwoo stared in amazement.

Before the crushed soldier could hit the ground, it turned into a puff of black smoke.

Fwssshhh…

The black smoke then re-formed into a knight, good as new.

Nice!

Jinwoo was delighted.

He'd almost forgotten what these soldiers were—undead. The ice bear was enraged after seeing how futile its attack had been.

Grrraaahhh!

While the infantry bought time, the mage soldiers completed their spells.

Boom!

Krakoom!

Fireballs flew from their hands, causing explosions left and right. Knights caught in the middle of the blasts simply regenerated, but the bears caught on fire and cried out in pain.

Arrroooooo!

Arrroo!

The shadow soldiers then went in for the kill, stabbing the moribund bears with their swords.

Shhhk!

Shunk!

The ice bears fell to the combined attacks of the infantry and mage soldiers.

Wow……

Jinwoo observed the battle with fascination. With the infantry's quick regeneration ability and the mages' powerful fire attacks, the shadow soldiers' combat skills far exceeded his expectations.

The bears were forced to retreat into their caves. Jinwoo thought the battle was almost over when…

GRAAAAAAWR!

Something enormous emerged from one of the caves with an ear-piercing roar.

"That's……"

Jinwoo could only stare. It was an ice bear a head taller and with shoulders twice as broad as any of the other bruins around.

Graaah!

The beast destroyed the shadow soldiers with one blow.

Hwoooosh!

Kraaaak!

The undead warriors couldn't regenerate fast enough to keep up with the ice bear.

Crack!

Bam!

Jinwoo groaned. "So that's the head of the pack…?"

He had expected there to be some kind of leader, since the bears lived in a pack, but this creature was bigger and stronger than anything he'd imagined.

Gwooooh! The beast was speedily tearing its way through the soldiers toward Jinwoo.

A message suddenly popped up.

Ping!

[A shadow soldier is unable to regenerate due to insufficient mana.]

[A shadow soldier is unable to regenerate due to insufficient mana.]

What?

When Jinwoo urgently checked how much mana he had left, it was as the system indicated.

[MP: 0/1,860]

With his mana exhausted, the defeated soldiers transformed back into shadows and returned to Jinwoo instead of regenerating. Apparently, the caster required mana in order to regenerate soldiers.

Damn mana……

Yet another reason Jinwoo needed to increase his intelligence stat.

He hummed in thought. The tide had turned with the appearance of the leader.

But he remained unconcerned.

I think it's time to fight fire with fire.

Jinwoo crossed his arms and summoned his top shadow soldier.

"Igris!"

A shadow separated from Jinwoo's own, and a knight wearing a helmet with a long mane quietly emerged. Jinwoo pointed with his chin. Igris bowed to Jinwoo and immediately charged.

Tmp, tmp, tmp, tmp!

Igris evaded the massive bear's front paw by sliding between its legs and, taking a dagger from his waist, severed its hamstring.

Graaaah!

That was just the beginning. Igris unsheathed his sword and easily avoided the bear's continuous attacks while hacking away at its body. A hamstring, a claw, a paw, and a leg. The bear was diced like a hunk of meat.

"Wha……?" Jinwoo was rendered speechless by Igris's graceful moves.

The final cut was to the ice bear's neck.

Shhhk!

The huge head was severed from the body. Igris caught it before it hit the ground, marched over to Jinwoo, and knelt before him.

Thud.

The head was placed at Jinwoo's feet like an offering to a king. Jinwoo could only stare at the kneeling Igris.

Would I have been able to defeat Igris if it used its sword in our fight?

Lost without their leader, the remaining ice bears were easily slaughtered by shadow soldiers. With that, the battle was over.

The results were greatly satisfying.

[Shadow Infantry Lv.2]

[Shadow Infantry Lv.3]

[Shadow Infantry Lv.2]

[Shadow Mage Lv.2]

The soldiers' levels rose steadily, and because his minions were linked to Jinwoo's skills, he leveled up three times.

And the part he most enjoyed…

"Arise."

[Shadow Extraction successful.]

[Shadow Extraction successful.]

[Shadow Extraction successful.]

He gained new comrades.

Grrrrr…

Jinwoo handpicked a few of the fallen bears, including the leader, to extract and watched the inky creatures rise.

I thought they'd look like armored bears, but……

It wasn't what he was expecting. The new soldiers had the name Shadow Magic Beast, and while they were vaguely bear shaped, it was difficult to tell if they were a solid or gas. As the creatures panted, black vapor rose from their shoulders.

Not the best visually speaking, but they're clearly the shadows of ice bears.

Their great strength and destructive power would prove useful in time.

Just then…

Graaaawr!

Jinwoo's ears twitched at the roars of more bruins. By the sound of it, there were quite a few of them, too.

So there's another bear neighborhood close by?

Since it was already late, he decided to investigate that area the following day.

His face split into a happy smile.

* * *

“Gaaaah!”

“Argh!”

His colleagues were screaming. Chul couldn’t believe his eyes.

This can’t be happening!

He’d…

To think that he’d failed! He was supposed to be destined to be among the best in the White Tiger Guild. He’d received special training for that purpose. And yet, he’d failed? He couldn’t accept that fact.

His party had fought against a horde of yetis even as they struggled against hypothermia and hunger. Next, they’d run into frost giants. They’d lost two teammates, but they had won. It appeared as though the raid was going well.

However…

However…!

As soon as they finished their bout with the frost giants, they were attacked from behind by the Ice Slayers. Those evil bastards had been watching and lying in wait for when the party’s stamina was depleted.

What came next was a massacre. Hunters were eliminated in a flash.

“B-boss!” A collapsed hunter held his bloody hand out for help.

Chul stumbled backward as an Ice Slayer suddenly leaped onto the hunter's back and slit his throat.

Gak!

Looking up from the gash, the Ice Slayer gave him a serene smile.

Chul screamed. "Ah… Aaaaaaaah!"

He ran into the forest without looking back. Ice bears in the forest? Bears in the forest were nothing compared to yetis, frost giants, and Ice Slayers in front of him. Chul was literally running for his life.

Several Ice Slayers noticed his fleeing back and took aim, but an Ice Slayer with hair down to its waist raised an arm. The archers put down their bows.

……

When the long-haired Slayer signaled the others to follow Chul, one by one, the Ice Slayers disappeared from view.

* * *

Chul burst through the underbrush.

"Huff, huff, huff…"

He was gasping for breath. He thought about the Ice Slayers that had giggled derisively as they slaughtered the hunters, and he trembled again in fear.

He looked down at his hands. They were frozen, and he had difficulty sensing anything. He had lost feeling in his toes a long time ago. In this condition, he couldn't put up much of a fight.

If it wasn't for this cold weather… No, if we hadn't been starving these past few days, we wouldn't have been defeated like this.

He still couldn't accept the party's, or rather, his own failure.

Chul mumbled to himself as he raised his head.

How deep into the forest did I go?

He surveyed the area around him. The faint smell of blood was coming from somewhere nearby. Chul followed the scent.

He didn't have to go far. He passed between some trees and came to a clearing where he saw something unbelievable.

Impossible!

There were over twenty ice bears lying dead around the entrance to some caves. He'd wondered why he hadn't encountered a single ice bear despite every tree having some kind of territorial mark.

"What is this?"

Chul inspected the carcasses. Every one of them had multiple lacerations. Some had burns here and there as well. He recalled Jinwoo's motley crew.

"No way…… Could they have killed these monsters?"

No, that wasn't possible. All the lacerations looked like they'd been made by swords, and as far as he knew, none of the hunters who'd gone into the forest favored a sword.

And those two E ranks didn't even have any weapons.

Objectively speaking, the possibility they were still alive was little to none.

There was only one other logical conclusion.

There have to be Ice Slayers nearby!

His heart sank. He thought he'd finally evaded them, but they seemed to be everywhere. Terrified, Chul headed deeper into the forest while trying to breathe quietly.

He needed to get farther away from here, and fast. He wanted to get out of the Ice Slayers' territory.

* * *

At the same time…

Aroooo! an ice bear cried out as it fell to the ground. Shadow soldiers swarmed it and made sure it stayed down.

[You have leveled up!]

"Excellent."

Jinwoo located another bruin neighborhood. Five days had passed on their side since they'd entered the red gate, and he'd crashed three different settlements.

I think I've gotten rid of all the bears in this forest.

Both he and his soldiers had leveled up quite a bit. Initially, it had taken two soldiers to defeat a bear, but they could now handle one-on-one combat.

Jinwoo was quite satisfied with his setup. As soldiers became more capable, he assigned them different tasks.

He was able to store thirty soldiers now. Twenty-eight soldiers fought the bears, one collected essence stones, and the last butchered the meat. Jinwoo didn't have to lift a finger.

I don't sense any more magic beasts.

It looked like he had defeated all the magic beasts roaming the forest, which meant…

I should start heading to the boss soon.

A dungeon break could take a month or several months. He couldn't just sit patiently and wait for an exit.

Plus, I have to catch that impudent elf.

How dare a mere magic beast provoke a hunter? The thought of that smug grin infuriated Jinwoo every time.

* * *

He could smell roasting meat.

Sniff, sniff.

Chul's sense of smell was now extremely keen from hunger. The only thing he'd eaten since getting stuck inside the red gate was a single rabbit. The smell of food made him drool reflexively.

The meat might belong to Ice Slayers.

But if there are only a few of them……

He might be able to beat them and steal their food. He was so hungry that it seemed like a good plan.

Let's do it.

Chul trod as lightly as possible, cautiously approached the source of the tantalizing scent, and found…the other party of hunters.

He was flabbergasted.

Huh?

The smell of roasting meat came from their campfire.

How are they still alive?

His eyes narrowed. He couldn't see one of the E-rank hunters.

Looks like he was so cocky that he was the first to die.

That much was easy to understand, but he found the rest of the scene rather difficult to process. Something was off, and Chul struggled to comprehend it.

Wait a minute, their clothes are……?

He spotted winter jackets, thick blankets, a tent, and various tools. They were well stocked on supplies.

How is this possible?

The befuddled hunter's eyes zoomed in on something. There was bread next to the meat. They had even brought food. His hunger gave way to anger.

These bastards……

He gnashed his teeth. How could they keep all these supplies to themselves?

If my hands weren't frozen—or hell, if I wasn't starving, I could've handled ice elves no problem.

Once he reached the conclusion that the other group had stolen supplies meant to be equally distributed, he could no longer contain his rage.

He rushed out of the bushes. "You bastards!"

Heejin jumped up, startled. "Chul Kim? What are you doing here?"

She was about to lie and say she was glad to see him but found she couldn't get the words out, because the way Chul looked at them was rather hostile. He wasn't trying to hide his animosity.

"Our team failed to clear the dungeon because we didn't have enough food and equipment. How do you have all this?"

"That's, uh……" Heejin couldn't say.

If she mentioned Jinwoo now, Chul's rage would be redirected at him, and Jinwoo was basically their guardian angel.

He didn't like Jinwoo from the start.

Heejin shut her mouth. Chul's eyes were fiery.

“I don’t think all of you are accomplices, so who hid all this from the others? If you tell me who, I’ll leave the rest of you alone!”

The veins on his neck began to bulge. “I said, who hogged all the tools and put their colleagues in danger?”

His howl echoed throughout the forest. Chul was ready to wreak vengeance for his fallen colleagues, even if he spilled some blood.

“I’m going to count to three. If you don’t tell me who did this, I’ll consider all of you accomplices.”

Frightened, Songyi gripped Heejin’s sleeve.

“H-Heejin……”

Heejin pulled the girl into her arms. Myunghwan and Kijoong broke into a cold sweat.

Chul was A rank. Even if they fought him together, there was no guarantee they could defeat him. Still, they refused to mention Jinwoo’s name.

“One.”

Chul drew his sword.

Shhhing.

“Two.”

Even now, the low-rank hunters wouldn’t open their mouths. How dare these low-ranking fools not do as he ordered? That made Chul even angrier.

Who do they think I am…?

His eyes gleamed viciously.

This woman would be the first to go. Heejin had betrayed Chul’s team and left with the low-rank hunters.

Yes, she left because she was up to something.

That was the only conclusion he could come up with.

He stood in front of Heejin and spat out the final count. “Three.”

Heejin squeezed her eyes shut when…

“Four.”

Smack!

Something hit Chul in the back of the head, sending him flying face-first into the ground, where his prone body skid farther by a few meters.

The other hunters were taken by surprise.

“Captain!”

Jinwoo had smacked Chul’s head so hard that steam rose from his palm.

He was dumbfounded. “What kind of nonsense is he spouting? Who put whom in danger?”

7

ICE-SLAYER HUNTING

7
ICE-SLAYER HUNTING

“Jinwoo!” Songyi welcomed Jinwoo with tears in her eyes.

“Captain!”

They weren’t as emotional as Songyi, but the faces of the two male hunters lit up, and Heejin heaved a big sigh of relief upon seeing him. Jinwoo didn’t have time to respond to his teammates’ welcome, though.

“Shhh.”

He placed a finger to his lips. The other four had been about to go in for a hug, but they froze.

Heejin spoke first. “Wh-what?”

That damn bastard deserved to be beaten to death. Jinwoo glared at the unconscious Chul.

“He brought along some uninvited guests.”

He could sense numerous presences in the forest. There was no time to consider whether Chul had led them here on purpose, because the real problem was over there.

Hwoom.

Sensing that Jinwoo was aware of their presence, the Ice Slayers deactivated Stealth and made themselves known. There were around twenty of them. And with them…

Jinwoo's eyes were fixed on a long-haired Ice Slayer riding a horse.

……That's the dungeon boss.

Compared to the ice bears or even the other Slayers around it, the energy the boss emitted was off the charts. If that wasn't the boss, then what else could be?

For the first time in a while, Jinwoo felt uneasy.

At the same time, the boss had also assessed Jinwoo.

"So it's true. There is treasure among the human trash."

"What?"

"……?"

The boss was startled by Jinwoo's outburst.

"You… Do you know our language?"

Jinwoo was just as floored.

How am I able to communicate with it?

He understood the magic beast's language. Not only that, but he was able to speak it as well. The language he'd never learned flowed out of him as naturally as his mother tongue.

"You can speak their language?" Heejin had been flabbergasted so many times that it was par for the course by now.

Her words confirmed that Jinwoo was the only one who understood what the boss had said.

Is this because of the system?

Was it like an auto-translator?

Jinwoo met the boss's gaze as it scrutinized him with interest.

"We can communicate… Good. There is someone I'd like to introduce you to."

The boss pointed at an Ice Slayer standing behind it. "I believe you two have met before."

Jinwoo's eyes narrowed. The Ice Slayer definitely looked familiar.

That bastard is……

It was the one who'd shot an arrow at Songyi and mocked him. How could he forget that arrogant mug?

That Ice Slayer was smiling even now.

"I said there was a strong one among the humans. This one wishes to challenge you to a batt—"

Even before the boss finished its sentence, Knight Killer was hurtling toward the Ice Slayer.

Shunk!

The dagger lodged right in the middle of the Ice Slayer's face.

"Whoa!" The squeal came from among the hunters. Kijoong quickly covered his mouth.

Whump.

The Ice Slayer hit the ground. Jinwoo held out his hand, and Knight Killer dislodged from the Slayer's face and flew back to him. He caught it in a reverse grip and lowered his stance.

"Anything else to say?"

The boss was impressed. "……You really are strong."

It got off the horse but didn't brandish a weapon or display any hostility.

It continued leisurely. “But I’m sure you’re aware that you wouldn’t be able to defeat all of us.”

There were over twenty ice elves, and the boss was among them. The rest of the Ice Slayers were no match for Jinwoo, who had leveled up considerably by killing ice bears. One of the Slayers had already died by his dagger.

How should I deal with them?

As the gears turned in his head, the boss continued. “I have a suggestion for you.”

“Suggestion?”

“That’s right. It won’t be such a bad deal for you.”

“……”

Jinwoo was amazed.

It was well known that humanoid magic beasts had intellect, but he never thought he could make a deal with one. Jinwoo decided to hear it out at least.

“……I’m listening.”

The boss laughed, as if it had expected this reaction. “Let me ask you one thing.”

“……?”

“Why are you allied with these humans, even though you yourself are not one of them?”

Jinwoo’s brow furrowed. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Ha-ha! You weren’t aware, either?” The boss burst out laughing and pointed at its temple. “We hear a constant voice in our heads that tells us to kill humans. But standing before you, I don’t hear that voice.”

Ah. So that's what it meant? In that case, Jinwoo had a potential explanation.

When it talks about humans, it probably means hunters.

Since the underground temple—thanks to the system—Jinwoo had become a Player, so to be pedantic, he was a little different from other awakened beings called hunters.

That's why it thinks I'm not human.

That made sense to Jinwoo. As it appeared he understood, the boss nodded. "We don't need to fight. I don't want needless casualties on our side." The boss finally got to the point. "Just hand over those humans behind you. Then, I will guarantee your life. How does that sound?"

Jinwoo had a question in return. "Let me ask you something."

"Certainly."

"Who are you? Where are you from, and why are you trying to kill humans?"

"We are—"

Suddenly, the boss's face, smile and all, froze. It didn't last long. The boss then relaxed its smile and spoke again.

"We don't need to fight. I don't want needless casualties on our side."

What is this?

Jinwoo's eyes narrowed.

The boss had repeated the same lines, like some NPC in a game asked a question it was unable to answer.

"Just hand over those humans behind you. Then, I will guarantee your life. How does that sound?"

Its expression appeared unruffled, the creature apparently unaware that it was acting strange. The Ice Slayers behind the boss also were also seemingly oblivious to their boss's sudden odd behavior.

……

Because Jinwoo wasn't saying anything, the boss gave him a nudge. "Will you accept my offer?"

Jinwoo wanted to find out more about the magic beasts, but it was a waste of time.

Well then……

The only thing left was to make a choice. His mind was already made up.

"No." Jinwoo smirked.

I would love your shadow, so I can't let you go.

Kill the boss and take the shadow. That had been Jinwoo's plan from the moment he'd laid eyes on the boss, and he had no intention of changing it now.

"Are you challenging my soldiers and me? You're outnumbered. Do you think you can do this alone?"

Jinwoo smiled. Soldiers?

You think you're the only one? I have soldiers, too.

He summoned his shadows. The minions trapped in his shadow appeared behind him in an instant.

"Ahhh!" The scream again came from Jinwoo's group. The shadowy bears and soldiers had materialized next to Kijoong, startling him and making him trip over his feet.

"A-ah……"

Jinwoo felt bad for his teammates, whose faces had turned pale, but it was a moment of crisis, after all. There was no time to explain everything.

Well, even if there wasn't a crisis, I wouldn't explain anything to them.

Twenty-nine shadow soldiers. Jinwoo stood before his army and glared at the boss.

"Who's outnumbered now?"

Finally, the boss growled. "……Nice party trick. Fine. If you wish to die, I'll grant you that wish."

The boss drew two daggers from its waist. This was what Jinwoo had hoped for.

Jinwoo summoned Knight Killer in his right hand and Kasaka's Venom Fang in his left.

Party trick?

The boss did have a point. Even though Jinwoo had more soldiers, they weren't powerful enough to take down the boss. Jinwoo was well aware of this. It was likely the source of the boss's confidence.

Jinwoo needed reinforcements.

Powerful reinforcements…

He did have one. Jinwoo looked to the side where Chul lay unconscious.

"Attack!" the boss yelled, and the Ice Slayers drew their bows.

"Teddy bears!" Jinwoo positioned the shadow beasts up front.

Shunk! Shunk! Shunk! Shunk!

Graaaah!

Arrows rained down from above, and the shadow beasts who were struck cried out in pain. Before the Ice Slayers could fire off any more arrows, the infantry began their charge, and the mages started to cast their spells.

There was a fire in Jinwoo's eyes.

Your ass is mine!

Chul's sword had fallen behind Jinwoo's foot, and he kicked the blade toward Chul before he took off. His eyes were fixed on the Ice Slayers' boss, and it was waiting for him.

Soon, sparks flew from the four daggers wielded by Jinwoo and the boss.

Clang! Clang! Ca-clang!

The shadow soldiers and Ice Slayers clashed as well.

Myunghwan looked at Heejin. "Ummm…shouldn't we help?"

She shook her head. "There's nothing we can do here."

On the battlefield were big black monsters waving their giant claws around, shadowy soldiers that respawned instantaneously, and high-rank Ice Slayers brandishing swords and bows.

What good are some B- and C-rank hunters here?

All they could do was pray. Heejin anxiously watched Jinwoo battle the long-haired Ice Slayer.

"Ngh!" Jinwoo cried out.

His opponent was a high-rank dungeon boss, all right! It looked like an even fight, yet Jinwoo was the only one getting nicked. Could he last three more minutes at this point? His MP was quickly depleting because his soldiers had to keep re-forming.

Eventually, the mages completed their spell. Balls of fire larger than volleyballs dropped on the Ice Slayers.

BOOM!

The power of the leveled-up mages was extraordinary. The explosion was so loud, it roused Chul.

"Mm……"

Chul lifted his head.

Clank! Clank! Bang!

With his blurred vision, he saw terrifying Ice Slayers and black knights locked in battle.

What……is happening?

He didn't know what was going on, but he knew very well why he was lying there. Someone had struck him on the back of his head! That voice he'd heard behind him!

It was Jinwoo Sung!

Now wide awake, he felt his hands trembling from shame and hatred, but he was able to reach for his sword. There was no way for him to survive, surrounded as he was by Ice Slayers. If that was the case…

I'll take that bastard down with me!

His contemptuous eyes scanned the battlefield. And there he was! Jinwoo was fighting an Ice Slayer and paying no mind to what was behind him. This was his chance.

Chul stood up quickly and charged Jinwoo.

"Rahhhhh!"

Jinwoo sensed Chul was rushing toward them, and his mood lifted.

If it's you……

Jinwoo had predicted this was going to happen.

Chul aimed and swung his sword at Jinwoo's neck. "Eat shit!"

With the boss in front of him and Chul behind, Jinwoo shouted, “Igris!”

Igris rushed out of Jinwoo’s shadow and blocked Chul’s sword.

Clang!

“What?!”

Chul’s bloodshot eyes widened. But before the hunter could say anything, Igris stabbed his sword deep into Chul’s chest.

Shunk!

The sword pierced his chest and shot out his back.

“Arrrrgh!”

Jinwoo quickly withdrew a few steps.

I knew this was how you’d react, Chul.

Chul was the type of person who let his emotions dictate his actions. Even though they’d interacted only briefly, it had been enough for Jinwoo to figure him out.

Chul scowled at Jinwoo. “You…… You……!”

Those were his last words followed by his last breath. While Igris blocked the boss’s path, Jinwoo stood over Chul’s shadow.

“Arise!”

Then…

Ahhhhhhhh!

The plaintive cry was followed by a large hand bursting from the shadow.

* * *

[Shadow Extraction successful.]

Nice!

Jinwoo was pumped. The last puzzle piece had fallen into place in this boss raid. The black knight that spawned from his shadow was much beefier than Chul himself had been. Additionally, he held a huge war hammer in one hand and a shield as tall as a grown man in the other. The shadow exuded an immensely threatening aura.

Chul was pretty muscular, but this shadow is……

Despite the urgent situation, Jinwoo couldn't help but be impressed.

[Please choose a name.]

Right, a name.

Jinwoo took a peek at the battle still raging.

Igris was getting overwhelmed by the boss. He was only meant to buy time for Jinwoo by respawning.

Shhhk!

The boss lopped off one of Igris's arms.

I don't have time for this.

Name. It could be anything. Should he just use Chul Kim?

Jinwoo shook his head. He didn't feel comfortable naming the undead after a human.

Right. Chul Kim. Chul in English is Iron!

That would be his name. Jinwoo had chosen a name for the newly raised shadow soldier.

[IRON LV.1]

Knight Rank

Knight rank! That was the same rank as Igris, but Jinwoo had no time to be pleased.

I gotta get moving!

He gestured at the boss. “Iron!”

Iron’s large frame lumbered forward.

Stomp, stomp, stomp!

Jinwoo liked Iron’s size but worried about how he would fare against the boss’s speed. His worries didn’t last.

Iron puffed his chest and let out a battle cry.

RAAAHHH!

What was that?

Jinwoo flinched at the unexpected noise as a message appeared.

Ping!

[Iron is using Skill: Epic Taunt.]

[The master of the dungeon has entered a state of aggro.]

“An aggro skill!”

Chul was an A-rank tank, so of course he had a high-level aggro skill. And now Iron, who was his shadow, could mimic said skill perfectly.

The boss whipped around immediately. Even though it could’ve ended Igris right then and there, the boss charged Iron as if possessed. Iron used the Reinforcement skill to endure the boss’s dagger.

Yes!

Jinwoo nodded in approval.

Meanwhile, Igris’s severed arm regenerated.

Hwoom.

Black smoke rose from the stump and solidified into a new arm. The boss continued to focus on Iron. Jinwoo and Igris seized the opportunity to attack the boss together.

……

Heejin had no words for the spectacle she was witnessing. It was incredibly surreal. She had no desire to learn more about what was happening.

Next to her, Songyi timidly spoke up. “Heejin…?”

The hunter belatedly answered. “Um……yeah?”

“Do all hunters’ fights look like this?” Songyi’s voice trembled from fright.

Heejin sounded defeated. “…If they did, I wouldn’t have been able to get my hunter’s license.”

Myunghwan watched dazedly. “Maybe…we’re only dreaming all this?”

If this were a dream, then it was actually a nightmare. Heejin gasped as she watched the shadowy…*things* fight the magic beasts. At the same time, she began to worry about something.

“Once we get out of here…we’ll have to talk to investigators……”

What were they supposed to tell people? She couldn’t even begin to explain what had happened with Jinwoo inside the red gate.

After she brought this up…

“Um… But you know…” Kijoong was still on the ground, shaking in fear, and had trouble getting the words out. “Isn’t it kind of amazing that we’re actually worried about what’ll happen after we leave?”

All the teammates nodded.

A high-rank dungeon and a red gate, no less. It was a place they'd never once thought they'd escape alive, but now they were concerned with the aftermath.

It was all because of one person.

Heejin turned her eyes to Jinwoo.

Thanks to you, Jinwoo Sung……

More than shock or gratitude, she felt awe.

Shhhk!

Kasaka's Venom Fang was stuck in the boss's shoulder.

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

[Debuff has been canceled out by the opponent's high resistance level.]

[Debuff: Drain has been activated.]

[Debuff has been canceled out by the opponent's high resistance level.]

As the enemies' levels went up, Kasaka's Venom Fang's debuff failed more times than not, but the injuries it inflicted were still effective.

Take that!

The boss's movements slowed as its wounds piled up.

"Nnnngh!" The smile on its face had vanished a long time ago. The boss had been easily dodging the combined attacks of Jinwoo, Igris, and Iron up to now, but it was starting to run out of steam.

Don't let up!

Iron grabbed the boss in a steely embrace.

"Now!" When Jinwoo gave the signal, Igris and Jinwoo retreated.

The boss had a look of confusion on its face. "What…?"

The mage soldiers dropped fireballs on Iron's position.

Kaboom!

Boom!

"Argh!" The boss cried out in pain for the first time. It twisted its body, and Iron's arm fell off.

Crack!

The boss turned to Jinwoo with murder in its eyes. "Graaaaah!"

Jinwoo was amazed once again.

It's injured that badly, but it keeps on coming!

After all, it was the master of a high-rank dungeon. Unfortunately for it, though, they were way past the tipping point.

Dagger Throw!

Jinwoo hurled Knight Killer like he had at the previous Ice Slayer, but he gave it an extra push using Ruler's Hand.

Hwoosh!

The dagger cut through the air in an instant.

Ugh!

Realizing it couldn't avoid the dagger in time, the boss blocked it with its own weapon.

Krrrk!

Because Knight Killer had been thrown with such force, the boss's dagger cracked upon impact. At the same time, Jinwoo used Stealth and Dash to close the gap and thrust Kasaka's Venom Fang into the boss's gut.

Shunk!

The boss's eyes bulged wide in shock. "Argh!"

Yet, even after all this, it grabbed Jinwoo's wrist. It was determined to go down fighting.

"Rrraaaaaagh!" The boss raised its dagger above its head.

Jinwoo smirked.

An enormous war hammer struck the boss's skull.

Blam!

Its head slammed into the snow covering the forest floor.

Iron lifted both his regenerated arms again and slammed the hammer down once more.

Whoom…

Splat!

Igris had been readying his next attack but instead sheathed his sword, and Jinwoo put his daggers into inventory.

The expected messages materialized.

Ping!

[You have defeated the master of the dungeon.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Phew. It's finally over…

Jinwoo exhaled in relief. It had been a hard-fought victory.

He was just about to catch his breath when Iron caught his attention.

"Hey! Hey, stop it now!" He rushed to halt Iron. The shadow warrior had been about to drop his hammer yet again but stopped. He was as merciless as when he had been Chul.

The boss's body had already been obliterated.

It's good that doesn't affect the shadow.

He smiled. The ultimate reward for the hard battle was right under his feet.

Jinwoo murmured, "Arise."

* * *

It was already three AM.

The four higher-ups monitoring the red gate did not look good.

Kichul finally spoke up. "We'll stay here, so why don't you leave first, Mr. President?"

"How could I go home while our guild members are stuck in there?" President Yoonho Baek was firm. He couldn't leave them upon his honor as an active guild master and S-rank hunter.

Suddenly, Sangmin's eyes widened. "Huh? The red gate…!"

Kichul and Sungchan also noticed that something odd was happening.

"The red gate is opening!"

"The dungeon's been cleared!"

"People…… People are coming out!"

President Baek clenched his fist tightly.

Chul Kim! Is this his handiwork?

Vmmmm…

Everyone rushed up to the gate.

Baek couldn't hide his excitement and looked for Chul, the leader, but he wasn't among those who emerged from the portal.

Huh? What? That's odd…

Sungchan had also placed his confidence in Chul, and his expression grew stranger with every second.

“Hunter Park! Hunter Ko and Hunter Yoon!”

“Hunter Sung!” A big smile crossed Sangmin’s face as he spotted Jinwoo with Songyi trailing the three White Tiger hunters.

I knew it!

His smile was a sharp contrast to the stony look on Sungchan’s face.

But the smile quickly vanished. The gate disappeared after only five hunters, including Jinwoo, stepped through.

Kichul asked, “Did only…the five of you make it?”

Jinwoo looked tired as he nodded affirmatively.

Kichul was devastated.

How could this be…?

He had tears in his eyes as he crossed out the names of the dead on his list.

Baek, who was watching this all happen, let out a cry.

Only the low-rank hunters survived? Only a single B rank came back?

This was impossible. What had happened inside that gate?

“Let’s go. I’ll take you home.”

Jinwoo was about to leave with Songyi when the president grabbed his wrist.

“Wait a second, sir.”

Smack!

Jinwoo snatched his arm back.

Baek’s gaze sharpened. “Let’s talk for a second.”

Jinwoo turned around. “I’m tired now. If you have any questions, please ask your guild members.”

Baek couldn’t stand it anymore and finally revealed his identity. “I’m Yoonho Baek, the guild master of the White Tiger Guild.”

Jinwoo’s eyes remained cold. “And?”

Jinwoo’s frosty reception caused Baek’s eyes to transform into those of a magic beast. They looked completely feral.

“We lost nine of our guild members from this incident. Don’t I have a right to ask you a few questions as the president of the guild?”

This wasn’t a request. It was an order—or perhaps a threat. Whatever one wanted to call it, Baek had no intention of letting Jinwoo go just like that.

But Jinwoo looked pissed. He didn’t cower at the immense pressure exuding from S-rank hunter Yoonho Baek.

“I saved three of your people. As the president, shouldn’t you start by thanking me?”

The tables had turned, and it was Baek who now felt the weight of Jinwoo’s anger. Everything Jinwoo said was right, after all. He couldn’t argue with that.

“……I apologize.”

Yoonho gave a repentant bow.

Jinwoo turned to leave. “Let’s go, Songyi.”

“Okay.”

Songyi peeked at Jinwoo’s expression as she followed him, so as to not irritate him more. Eventually, they got in the van and left.

This doesn’t make sense……

Yoonho's thoughts were all jumbled. He sprinted over to Heejin, the only surviving high-rank hunter.

"Excuse me, Heejin."

She was warming up with some tea Kichul had brought her.

"What's with that guy? Why is he in such a bad mood?"

They had escaped from a red gate after overcoming untold hardship, so why was he acting so savage?

Heejin shook her head, indicating she had no idea. "I don't know, sir. After he defeated the boss, he muttered something three times while he stood in front of the corpse. He's been acting that way ever since……"

"So he was fine until then?"

She looked at Myunghwan and Kijoong. They simultaneously nodded.

"What a strange man he is……," Yoonho mumbled to himself as he looked at the alley Jinwoo had driven down.

Sangmin started wringing his hands like it was all his fault. "I'm sorry, Mr. President. He was probably exhausted. He isn't a bad person, from what I've seen."

"No, that's not the problem."

"Pardon me?"

Yoonho looked sternly at Sangmin. "Why haven't you recruited him yet?"

"Sir?" Sangmin couldn't hide that he was flustered, but what he felt couldn't compare to Yoonho's vexation.

Against me……

The president swallowed hard as he recalled Jinwoo's cold eyes.

Gulp.

A thought occurred to him that he would be resigned to losing at least one arm in a fight against Jinwoo.

Possibly more than just an arm……

Realizing what Yoonho meant, Sangmin replied hastily. “I’m doing my best, sir.”

“Well, it’s not good enough.” Yoonho’s eyes shined.

Jinwoo Sung.

Clearly, Manager An had picked another winner.

“Use whatever resources you need. Make him a part of our guild at any cost.”

* * *

On the way home…

Vroooom…

A bitter taste filled Jinwoo’s mouth.

Haaah……

Unfortunately, he had failed to extract the Ice Slayer boss’s shadow. Was it because the difference between his and the boss’s abilities was too great?

It sucks, but there’s nothing I can do.

There would be plenty of high-rank bosses. What was important now was increasing his abilities so he wouldn’t miss out on another opportunity like that again.

Leveling up. That was what Jinwoo did best.

Also…

He took his left hand off the wheel for a second, and a beautifully curved dagger appeared.

[ITEM: BARCA'S DAGGER]
Acquisition Difficulty: A

Category: Dagger

A dagger used by the great warrior Barca. A powerful spell of weightlessness imbued in the dagger allows the user to be more agile while wielding it.

Attack Power +110

Agility +10

At least he hadn't walked away completely empty-handed. This was one of the two daggers the boss had used. He'd disposed of the damaged dagger and kept this one.

Barca's Dagger.

It not only packed a powerful attack but also boosted agility. It was a superior dagger compared to both the C-rank Kasaka's Venom Fang and the B-rank Knight Killer, which he'd spent so much money on.

The acquisition difficulty was A rank as well! It was the ideal weapon to replace Kasaka's Venom Fang, which was proving less and less effective as of late.

It even feels good in my hand.

Jinwoo was recounting the events of the red gate as they pulled up to Songyi's apartment building.

Skreeeech.

Songyi, who had sat so quietly that it was like she wasn't even there, got out of the front passenger seat and bowed.

"Have a safe drive."

“Right.”

She turned around. Looking at the way her shoulders slumped and how she was trudging to the door, Jinwoo felt he had achieved his goal.

Things got complicated, but it was all about convincing Songyi.

She appeared to no longer want to be a hunter. It would be the same for anyone whose first dungeon experience involved a red gate. Jinwoo was satisfied with himself and was about to start the van when the passenger-side door suddenly opened.

……?

Jinwoo looked over.

Songyi had returned and was holding open the door.

What’s she doing?

He didn’t have to wait long.

She politely bowed once again. “Thank you for everything, Jinwoo.”

Sometime while in the red gate, she’d stopped calling him “mister.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Um……”

“Hmm?”

“See you tomorrow…… Well, in a few hours.”

“A few hours”?

He eventually realized what Songyi meant after she was out of sight.

Ah.

Starting today, Jinwoo had to finish the rest of the raids with Jinho. He was going to see her again because she was a member of the squad.

That's what she was talking about.

He was relieved. Had Songyi refused to leave home because of this incident, it would've seriously messed up his schedule.

This turned out well.

Now Jinwoo could clear C-rank dungeons even faster using his shadow soldiers. He was confident he'd complete the rest of the raids in record time. Besides, he was looking forward to seeing Jinho's reaction when faced with the shadow soldiers for the first time.

It can't beat Kijoong's reaction, though.

Jinwoo chuckled as he slowly turned the corner.

* * *

The following morning…

"Yaaawn."

Jinwoo was still sleepy as he made his way to the lobby of his apartment building. It felt like he'd blinked and it was already time to work.

"Good morning, boss!" Jinho gave an enthusiastic greeting.

"How did you get here without your van?" Jinwoo had used the team's trusty van yesterday, so it was parked in a lot nearby.

"I took a taxi, boss."

"Ah, I see."

So much for his plans to be the one to pick Jinho up.

"That's okay, boss. You're already doing plenty for me, so I should at least be the one driving," Jinho replied with a laugh.

It was a typical morning, except…

“Huh?”

Jinho noticed the cylindrical object in Jinwoo’s hand. It piqued his curiosity.

“What’s that, boss?”

“Oh, this?” Jinwoo grinned mischievously. “Something I’ll need in the dungeon today.”

Huh.

At that moment, Jinho felt a chill run up his spine.

Is that a weapon he’ll use in the dungeon?

Jinwoo was already overpowered, so what frightening new weapon was this? Jinho felt anxious.

Gulp.

He took a breath to calm down and nodded.

“Okay, boss, let’s go.”

“Hold on.” Jinwoo pulled out his phone and made a call. “We need to pick someone up.”

“What? Who?”

“Hey, Songyi. Meet us downstairs—we’ll give you a ride.”

Songyi… Was that…?

As soon as Jinwoo hung up the phone, Jinho pounced. “Are we picking up that high school girl in our squad?”

Jinwoo nodded in confirmation. Songyi’s apartment was on their way, so he figured they might as well pick her up.

But Jinho read more into it. Songyi Han. She was the cute high schooler who always wore her hair in a bun.

He knows her phone number and was all friendly with her… Are they already that close?

Jinwoo was impressive even from a guy's point of view.

Especially when he only uses a dagger to take on a monster, he really is……

The boss might not be interested in her, but it wouldn't be surprising to discover that she was crushing on Jinwoo.

Jinho nodded. He was determined to get verification.

"So, boss…… Should I refer to Songyi as 'ma'am' from now on?"

Did he eat something weird during breakfast? Jinwoo's reaction was asking as much. Though usually clueless, Jinho understood the hunter's expression this time.

"Uh…… So you two aren't dating?"

"She's just my sister's friend."

"Oh. Ohhh."

That explained it. Jinho finally grasped the reality of the situation. And to think he'd been about to call her "ma'am"! He was so embarrassed.

Eventually, Songyi emerged, more dressed up than usual.

Jinho grinned.

Okay, so she's a teenage girl with a crush on her friend's older brother.

As squad leader, he thought he should compliment her nice outfit, but Jinwoo greeted her first.

"Did you get any sleep?"

Jinho froze.

……

Songyi smiled as she shook her head. “Not at all.”

“Take a nap in the van. You must be tired.”

Jinho couldn’t follow their conversation.

H-huh?

It was Songyi’s turn to ask in return, “What about you, Jinwoo?”

“I just took a light nap. It was past four by the time I got home.”

“I see……”

Night? Not a wink? Tired? Past four by the time he got home? Jinho was freaking out by now. Jinwoo had started heading to the van but stopped to look back at Jinho.

“Jinho, let’s go.”

“Um… I… Boss?”

“……?”

“Um, Songyi is a minor, boss.”

“Yeah, and?”

“……Nothing, boss.”

What a man among men. Jinho was amazed that Jinwoo refused to be shackled by society’s rules.

He really isn’t an average guy, that’s for sure.

Jinho reflected on himself for ever measuring Jinwoo against typical societal standards.

* * *

Meanwhile, in a small meeting room at the White Tiger Guild.

“That’s all I know.” Heejin ended her statement.

Although President Baek had recommended she get some rest first, Heejin had insisted that she had gotten plenty of rest (?) inside the red gate and wanted the investigation to start immediately.

"……"

"……"

The two leading the inquiry, President Baek and Manager An, were speechless. Kichul, who had been in charge of the raid, was currently at the association to follow up on how to handle the situation, so it was only the three of them in the room.

Sangmin broke the silence. "Is all of this true?"

"You can ask Myunghwan and Kijoong. They'll tell you the same thing."

The two men had gone straight home, saying they missed their families.

Heejin guaranteed that their testimonies would be no different from hers.

I only told them what I saw with my own eyes.

For example, she told them she'd hear ice bears screaming in the distance inside the forest whenever Jinwoo wasn't with them, and she'd see him get up at night to do push-ups while everyone else was asleep. She said nothing about what the others had seen or heard, only things she'd witnessed herself.

"Hngh……"

Sangmin made a sound that could've been a gasp or a groan.

Jinwoo could knock out an A-rank hunter with one punch, manipulate space as he wished, and summon a few dozen of his own soldiers. It was all hard to believe, but the most shocking thing was…

President Baek broke his silence and stated, “Jinwoo Sung cleared a high-rank dungeon almost entirely by himself.”

It was very possible he was an S-rank hunter.

“Incredible.”

Even though he’d fought alongside minions he’d summoned, they were not his partners but rather part of Jinwoo’s skill. Which was to say, Jinwoo truly had solo cleared the dungeon.

“Even if you’re a very high-rank hunter, it’s extremely difficult to clear a dungeon on your own.”

On top of that, it had been a red gate. On his own, Baek might be able to clear a B-rank gate. Jinwoo’s feat was possible only because he had the means to summon a large number of his own soldiers.

Sangmin marveled, “Jinwoo is definitely an awakened being with rare abilities.”

Yoonho agreed. “It’s unusual enough for a hunter to be able to control one summoned creature, but one who can summon a whole army of them……”

Since becoming an active S-rank hunter, Yoonho had met countless other skilled hunters, but he’d never heard of that kind of skill.

“He’s an awakened being with skills on a completely different level……” The president was truly amazed.

A question suddenly popped into Sangmin’s head. “In terms of net worth, how valuable is Jinwoo now?”

“……” Yoonho had no answer.

But one thing was clear. Whatever Jinwoo was worth right now, his value would increase exponentially as soon as he was reevaluated, which was why they needed to recruit him before then.

The White Tiger Guild had already lost an A-rank and several B-rank hunters. If they couldn't recruit Jinwoo, who was a great boon, the loss would be immeasurable.

"I have faith in you, Manager An." As President Baek sent him a trusting look, Sangmin's face filled with determination.

Just then…

"Hmm?" Both Yoonho and Sangmin looked over to Heejin.

She was holding up her hand.

President Baek asked, "Did you have a question?"

Now that she had their attention, she put down her hand. "Please let me help you."

"With what?"

"With recruiting our capta—I mean, Hunter Jinwoo Sung."

Yoonho and Sangmin exchanged looks before turning back to Heejin again. Sangmin, the one in charge of recruitment, cocked his head.

"But why would you…?"

"Because I've spent more time with him than anyone in our guild, so I think I can help."

Although it had only been six hours in real time, she'd spent almost a week with Jinwoo in the red gate. It was a reasonable suggestion. It didn't hurt that she was also attractive, which could be a useful tool for recruitment.

As soon as Heejin sensed that they were about to cave, she added, "There's one condition, though."

Baek raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"If Jinwoo joins the White Tiger Guild, please put me in his strike squad, no questions asked."

She'd had a revelation about just how horrifying high-rank gates were and how powerless she could be once inside.

It's what Jinwoo was trying to teach Songyi…

It was humiliating, but what could she do? Pretending that something scary wasn't actually scary was dumb and reckless. What she'd experienced inside the red gate had certainly been terrifying.

However, she couldn't give up the spoils and status she enjoyed as a B-rank hunter. The high annual salary! The countless benefits! The social recognition! Despite the risk, it was the perfect occupation. After all, it was high risk and high return.

But Heejin had discovered a way to mitigate that risk.

Raids with the captain.

The person she'd envied the most inside the red gate was none other than Songyi, and it was for one reason only. It was because of something Jinwoo had promised her.

"I brought you here, so I promise to take responsibility and protect you."

In other words, he wasn't responsible for protecting any members other than Songyi. The rest of them were just extras. The whole time they were together, Heejin had worried that Jinwoo and Songyi would secretly leave the party. And then on the sixth day, Jinwoo really had cleared the high-rank dungeon by himself and sent Songyi Han home safely.

He'd kept his promise.

After witnessing all that, Heejin was convinced. If she went on raids in Jinwoo's squad, she would always be safe. Just the thought made her heart race.

He was calm, cool, and collected, had amazing abilities, and carried a sense of responsibility. She wanted her next raid to be with Jinwoo again, so that was her sole demand.

Put me in the strike squad led by Jinwoo Sung.

President Baek and Sangmin discussed the matter, and then…

"Sounds good." President Baek guffawed. "So for now, you will work with Manager An."

"Thank you."

Scouting Jinwoo wouldn't be easy, that's for sure. Jinwoo was well aware of how valuable his abilities were.

Even inside the red gate, he overflowed with confidence.

Convincing him to join the guild wasn't going to be easy.

Still……

She'd have a chance to see him again. Heejin hid her smile from the others.

President Baek was lost in his thoughts but finally decided to ask. "Manager An."

"Yes?"

"I would like Jinwoo's number, please."

"Sir, that's……" Sangmin explained to President Baek why he'd been hiding Jinwoo. Yoonho mulled it over, then nodded in understanding.

"I get why he wants to hide his abilities, even though he's so great. Some people in the world just want to go unnoticed."

A man with that kind of personality had just revealed his secret abilities in front of other people. Of course, he'd been in a dangerous situation, but it most likely meant that he was also self-assured enough to slowly reveal himself to the world.

“As long as things don’t blow up, Jinwoo can’t blame you, Manager An.”

Sangmin nodded. Of course, he had no intention of leaking this story.

Not only would that cause problems for Jinwoo, but the news wouldn’t benefit either the guild or to the association.

“That’s true, but……” Sangmin was worried about something else.

His boss could ruin everything by rushing into things without knowing Jinwoo’s firm nature. Sangmin wanted to prevent that from happening.

“Sir, I don’t think contacting him directly yourself is……”

Yoonho realized what concerned Sangmin. “Oh, it’s not about recruitment.”

“Sorry? Then why…?”

“It’s like Jinwoo said.”

Yoonho had realized something while listening to Heejin’s statement. The White Tiger Guild owed Jinwoo. He’d saved three of their new recruits. Moreover, he’d stopped the White Tiger Guild’s name from being tarnished by clearing the red gate. Even though it had been the association’s mistake, their public image would’ve taken a dive if news regarding the loss of their recruits had gotten out.

Just thinking about the possibility was awful and gave him chills.

And despite that, I tried to interrogate him!

Yoonho now understood why Jinwoo had been so sour. He hadn’t realized it at the time, but now that he was aware, he wanted to do something about it.

“As the president of the White Tiger Guild, I would like to officially thank Hunter Sung as well as apologize to him about yesterday.”

Oh, well, if that's the case……

His words won over Sangmin. Knowing the president's straightforward personality, he wouldn't thank Jinwoo just to turn around and try to recruit him. Not to mention, Sangmin also wanted to thank Jinwoo.

"Okay, then." Sangmin pulled out his phone and looked for Jinwoo's contact info.

"What's Jinwoo's number?" President Baek also took out his phone to enter Jinwoo's number.

"The number is…" Sangmin stopped because he felt an intense pressure, and he turned his head.

"Um, and why do you need it, Hunter Park?"

"Ah, right……"

Heejin smiled awkwardly and furtively hid her phone, which was open to the *Add New Contact* page.

* * *

The Hunters, Korea's number one guild. Its president, an active S-rank hunter named Jongin Choi, had just been delivered some interesting news.

"Has this been confirmed……?"

No one would dare knock on his door to bring him misinformation! Myungki Jo, director of their recruiting team, nodded. "Yes, I received this intel from the association today."

All the large guilds had their own informants within the association. It wasn't something to be proud of, but this was how they got the jump on contacting high-rank awakened beings before anyone else.

But their informant had told him something odd today. Only after agonizing over it had Myungki gone to the president's office.

Since this is about White Tiger, the guild threatening our spot at the top…

He thought it was worth reporting to the president. As Myungki had expected, Jongin was very interested.

"Two C-rank hunters survived a red gate where an A-rank and six B-rank hunters got killed? And they cleared the gate? This doesn't make sense."

Even with that B-rank hunter…

Jongin shook his head as he read the memo. "There must've been someone else not mentioned in this memo."

He was certain of it. His extensive track record and experience with raids told him as much.

Myungki continued. "The association suspected this as well. However…"

"However?"

"White Tiger wouldn't talk."

"So the association let it go, just like that?"

"Since the incident was the association's fault, they didn't want to make a big deal out of it."

"Hmm……" Jongin tapped his chin. It was a force of habit, something he did when lost in thought.

Never mind the association, why was White Tiger being quiet? There could be only one reason.

"White Tiger got help from someone they don't want anyone else knowing about."

“I agree with you.”

They shared the same opinion. Jongin’s mind began to race.

A nameless supporter who saved the low-rank hunters from a difficult dungeon where many high-rank hunters were killed……

He was dying for some answers.

Is it a new hunter who has yet to be diagnosed as an awakened being? Or a criminal whose identity needed to be concealed?

It didn’t matter either way. If this was a new hunter, the Hunters would recruit them. If it was a criminal, the Hunters would ruin White Tiger’s reputation.

Jongin’s eyes twinkled. “We need to find out who was there.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“You have to set a fire in the raccoon’s den to catch the raccoon.”

Myungki’s eyes lit up. “Are you going to set White Tiger on fire?”

“You think I’m crazy? Why would I set fire to someone else’s property?”

“Ah, apologies. I just thought, since you’re such an amazing mage hunter……”

He was known as the Ultimate Hunter for a reason. If Jongin used his skills at full blast, blowing up a building would be like knocking down a house of cards.

Jongin explained. “That’s not what I mean. I’m saying we need to cause some trouble.”

“So that’s the fire……”

Jongin’s gaze turned fierce, and Myungki quieted.

“Let’s leak something to the media.”

Brilliant!

Myungki looked impressed.

“The Hunter’s Association’s big mistake! The tragedy of a large guild! And the mystery behind it all! Wouldn’t the press eat that up?”

Myungki nodded automatically.

Jongin laughed. “If the White Tiger Guild is ambushed by the media, they’ll have no choice but to reveal the mystery hunter.”

“That’s such a good idea!” Myungki laughed with him.

It was an excellent chance to deliver a huge blow to the White Tiger Guild, which had been hot on the Hunters’ heels.

Jongin couldn’t suppress his smile. “Call the reporters immediately.”

* * *

[You have entered the dungeon.]

Jinwoo took a deep breath as soon as he was inside.

Haah.

After being trapped in an outdoor-type dungeon for several days, the air in a cave-type dungeon felt different.

Soon, Jinho entered as well.

“What kind of magic beasts do you think we’ll run into here, boss?”

“Who knows……”

I sense something nearby, but…

Jinwoo felt their presence but didn’t see anything. He took a step forward.

The floor of the cave began to rise here and there.

Th-th-th-thud.

Th-th-thud.

They were humanoid magic beasts made of stone.

Jinho recalled hearing about them. “Boss, these are stonemen.”

Jinwoo acknowledged him with a nod.

These bastards were known for having the toughest hides among magic beasts found in low-rank dungeons. Conventional wisdom said to use magic to defeat stonemen, but…

“Hang on to this for me.” Jinwoo handed Jinho a plastic bag containing the cylinder and then walked toward the stonemen.

Gasp!

Jinho flinched, convinced the bag held some kind of weapon, but nothing happened.

Is it not a weapon?

In the meantime, Jinwoo equipped Barca’s Dagger and Knight Killer.

Shunk!

The head of a stoneman rolled away.

Jinwoo admired Barca’s Dagger with a pleased grin.

Not bad.

Suddenly, Jinwoo disappeared from view.

Tmp.

Ten or so stonemen fell to the ground just before Jinwoo reappeared behind them.

Cruuummmble…

I feel so much lighter and faster on my feet since I got out of the red gate.

That was only natural, as Jinwoo's current level was 60. After defeating ice bears and Ice Slayers, he'd leveled up nine times, from level 51 to level 60. Now, C-rank magic beasts felt like the goblins found in E-rank dungeons.

I don't even think I need weapons here.

That was good enough for a warm-up.

Should I speed things up, then?

It was time to summon his shadow soldiers. As if on cue, a group of stonemen came lumbering toward them from inside the cave.

Summon.

With his order, shadow soldiers hidden within Jinwoo's shadow quietly formed behind him.

This was followed by a scream of terror.

"Gyaaahhhh!"

Oh, right. Jinwoo smacked his own forehead and turned around.

He's here, too.

Jinwoo had been having so much fun that he'd forgotten Jinho was with him.

"B-b-boss?" From where he'd fallen on the ground, Jinho pointed at the shadow soldiers. "Wh-what are these?"

"It's too complicated to explain, but…it's one of my skills."

"You have the s-s-skill to summon these things?"

Jinwoo replied with a nod.

Jinho couldn't close his mouth. "Ahhh……"

This was Jinho's eleventh dive into a dungeon with Jinwoo. He'd thought himself incapable of being surprised by now, but clearly, he was wrong. Jinwoo had exceeded his expectations once again.

Gulp.

Jinho had trouble swallowing as he eyed the soldiers in their black armor emitting savage energy.

Jinwoo glanced in the other direction. The slow-moving stonemen had gotten closer. Jinwoo directed the soldiers at the beasts.

"Go."

His minions bolted as if they'd been waiting for his cue.

Th-th-th-thud…

Because almost forty soldiers moved at once, the floor of the cave quaked. Thanks to the addition of bigger shadow soldiers like Iron and the shadow beasts, the overall weight of the army had increased significantly.

It's like I'm looking at a squadron of tanks.

Jinwoo wore a satisfied look on his face. The soldiers stormed the place, and the dungeon was cleared in no time. All that was left were the remains of the stonemen, which sort of resembled cookie crumbs.

A C-rank dungeon decimated, just like that.

Whoa… Jinwoo was impressed.

If I keep this up, we'll complete the rest of the raids in a snap.

It shouldn't take too long to finish the remaining eight.

Tmp, tmp, tmp.

At the end of the battle, the shadow soldiers assigned to collect essence stones stood at attention before Jinwoo. Igris and Iron, the two knight ranks, were positioned at the front.

Once all the soldiers stopped moving, Jinho sheepishly made his way to Jinwoo's side.

“Here, boss.”

Jinho returned the plastic bag Jinwoo had given him earlier. Jinwoo grabbed the travel mug out of the bag and took a sip.

“What’s that, boss?”

“Vegetable juice.”

“Ah……”

“I tried it recently, and it’s pretty good.”

Slurp, slurp, slurp.

When the mug was almost empty, Jinwoo turned to Jinho.

“How many gates did you book today?”

Jinho was cautiously trying to touch the fur of a shadow beast but stopped and turned to Jinwoo.

“Four in total.”

That would leave five more dungeons if he did four today. There was no need to drag this out longer.

“Okay, let’s wrap everything up by tomorrow, even if it means we have to travel far.”

“Tomorrow?” Jinho inspected his surroundings. He saw the stonemen’s remains scattered everywhere.

If he keeps going at this speed, there won’t be any issues……

“You got it, boss. By the way……” Jinho hesitated a bit before continuing. “Is it okay if I’m the one who collects essence stones?”

“Why?”

“It kinda feels like they’ve stolen my place, boss. It’s a little upsetting.”

Jinwoo burst out laughing.

He’s special for sure.

And finally, the next day…

Jinwoo fulfilled his promise to Jinho and completed all nineteen raids.

8

EITHER A HUMAN OR MAGIC BEAST

8

EITHER A HUMAN OR MAGIC BEAST

“Since all the raids are done, how about we celebrate with a staff dinner, boss?”

Jinho looked expectantly at Jinwoo.

“Staff dinner? It’s just us.”

The other squad members had been dismissed as soon as the last raid was over. Songyi had said she had somewhere else to be, so it was only Jinwoo and Jinho in the van.

Jinho bashfully admitted, “Since you’re always helping me out, I wanted to buy you dinner today.”

What a roundabout way of asking to grab a bite.

Jinwoo chuckled. He wasn’t going to say no, since Jinho was paying. “Sure.”

With that, Jinho’s expression lit up. “I know this nice hotel restaurant, boss! Their steaks are fantastic.”

“How about……”

Steak was great and all if it was a fancy dinner that he had no choice but to attend, but Jinwoo preferred eating somewhere he could relax. As luck would have it, he spotted such a place.

Tap.

Jinwoo pointed through the window. “How about that restaurant?”

“Oh, you want Korean beef?”

“No, the place next to it.”

Jinho squinted.

Next to that…was only one other restaurant.

PORK BELLY BLOSSOMS—SPECIALIZING IN THINLY SLICED PORK BELLY

“Are you talking about the pork belly spot, boss?”

“You don’t like Korean barbecue?”

The corners of Jinho’s mouth turned up. “I sure do, boss.”

They parked the van nearby and entered the eatery to find it packed and bustling with servers and customers. It was seven o’clock in the evening, the restaurant’s dinner rush.

“Hello.” A friendly server approached. “How many in your party?”

“Just us two.”

“This way, please.” The server tried to seat them at a table in a corner of the room, but Jinho had other ideas.

“Excuse me…” Jinho scanned the dining area and pointed at a table near the window. “Can we sit over there?”

“Sorry, that’s reserved, so…”

Several empty tables were pushed together, presumably because it was a reservation for a large group. Jinho looked at the empty tables and shook his head. Eventually, they sat down at a table in the far corner of the establishment.

Jinho bowed his head in shame. “I’m sorry, boss.”

“Why are you apologizing? I was the one who wanted to come here.”

“Still, I could’ve taken you somewhere nicer.”

Jinwoo smiled and patted Jinho on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, kid. Enjoy the food.”

Jinwoo was actually worried this wouldn’t be to the little master’s taste.

And I didn’t tell him, but……

Jinwoo took in his surroundings. There were people and more people. Since he spent most of his time at home in solitude, he didn’t mind the boisterous environment.

“Here are your three servings of pork belly and two bottles of soju.”

The food and drinks were served.

Sizzle…

The meat was soon cooking on the grill top. Slice by slice, it began to disappear. Fortunately, Jinho seemed to be enjoying it.

“My college friends and I go for Korean barbecue often, boss.”

“Oh yeah? College friends?”

“Yup. I get along better with classmates from my university than the ones from the private school I used to attend.”

Jinwoo smiled and nodded. That sounded about right.

“Let me pour another shot for you, boss.”

“One for you, too.”

Glug, glug.

They poured soju in each other’s shot glasses, toasted, and tossed them back.

“Mm.”

But unlike Jinho, who was enjoying the liquor, Jinwoo looked disheartened.

“Huh? Don’t you like it, boss?”

“No, that’s not it……”

Jinwoo stared at the empty glass wistfully. He had been forgetting something.

Ping!

[A harmful substance has been detected.]

[Buff: Detoxing has been activated.]

[3, 2, 1… Detoxing is complete.]

Haah, I can’t get buzzed.

It was the same no matter how many shots he drank.

Ping, ping, ping!

As long as Jinwoo had the Health and Longevity buff, which blocked all toxic effects, soju was nothing more than bitter water.

The hunter cursed to himself.

Damn.

Since there was no point in drinking bitter water, he decided to order a soft drink. “Excuse me.”

A server came at once.

“Two more servings of pork belly and a soda, please.”

“Coming right up.”

Jinho looked curiously at Jinwoo after the server left. “Why didn’t you order more booze, boss?”

“I don’t do well with alcohol.”

Jinwoo was clearly nowhere near drunk when he answered, despite how many shots he’d already had, but that went over Jinho’s head, as per usual. In fact, he was already pretty tipsy and had a goofy grin on his face.

The boss is still human, after all……

Jinho stared intensely at Jinwoo, but Jinwoo just ignored him.

It’s not like he’s never acted this weird before.

Jinwoo did have something he was curious about. “What’s your plan for the future?”

Jinho sat up straight as if in the middle of a job interview. “Once I pass a simple written test at the association, I’ll get my guild master’s license right away. Then, I’m going to make a deal with my father.”

Jinho’s expression was earnest. He’d invested so much money in this endeavor that there was no turning back now.

Plus, I have a promise to keep.

Jinho had promised to hand the guild building over to Jinwoo. He could only do that if he became the guild master with Chairman Yoo’s approval.

In contrast, Jinwoo was completely lighthearted.

It’d be great to own a 30-billion-won building, but……

Well, that would just be icing on the cake for him. His true goal had been to level up. He had already climbed much higher level than he’d initially expected. Jinwoo had surpassed his previous goal. The result of his leveling up? He’d knocked out Chul, an A-rank hunter with a guaranteed annual salary of a few billion won, with a single punch.

Which means I should at least make more money than he did.

Money was guaranteed to follow him if he had power, so there was no need to be anxious. His more relaxed attitude showed on his face.

As Jinwoo recalled the last few days in his mind, Jinho probed him. “What are *you* going to do next, boss?”

“Me?”

Had he asked Jinwoo something he shouldn’t have? Jinho peeked at the hunter but relaxed after seeing Jinwoo’s chill expression.

“You won’t be able to reach me for a while. There’s somewhere I need to be.”

Jinho was taken aback. He looked like an abandoned puppy. He threw back another shot of soju.

Tak.

Jinho put the shot glass down on the table. After one more shot, he was finally able to speak from the heart. “Boss, please tell me if I’ve annoyed you. I’ll try my best not to do so ever again.”

This kid……

He’d taken it the wrong way when Jinwoo said he’d be unreachable for a while.

Jinwoo scratched the side of his head and asked a question in return. “Jinho.”

“Yes, boss?”

“What do you think of me?”

“Well……” Jinho’s eyes darted this way and that as he tried to think of a good answer.

“I have this brother who’s more than ten years older than I am, boss.”

Jinwoo had heard about him. Jinsung was the first-born son of Myunghan Yoo.

“My big brother doesn’t like me much, so I’ve probably spent more one-on-one time with you than him. You saved my life and helped me with my dream……”

Jinho looked Jinwoo squarely in the eye. “You’re more of a big brother to me than my own brother ever was.”

Jinwoo still scared him, but Jinho would always cherish the past few days tagging along with him. His admiration surpassed his fear.

“Since you think of me as your brother”—Jinwoo spoke with a smile—“then I’ll think of you as my brother as well.”

“B-b-boss……” The tip of Jinho’s nose was red, and he started sobbing. It would’ve been tolerable had that been the end of it, but then he went in for a hug. “Boss! Can I give you a hug?”

“Hey! You’re drunk, kid! Knock it off!”

“No, boss! I’ve never been more sober!”

“Can you even open your eyes right now?!”

“Uwaaaaaaah!” He was either really emotional or really drunk.

Jinwoo patted Jinho’s shoulder as he continued sobbing into the table. Soon, he went quiet and passed out.

“Haaaah…… What a weird kid.”

He leaned back in his chair.

Jinho Yoo. He was irritating in many ways, but Jinwoo was fond of him.

“Our next story…”

Jinwoo looked up at the news now playing on the restaurant’s TV.

It's already nine o'clock?

He was mindlessly watching when a familiar face popped up.

Huh?

Jinwoo's eyes widened. It was Yoonho Baek being questioned by reporters as he exited the guild building.

"Is it true there was a huge incident during the training session for new members?"

"Can you confirm that only high-rank hunters were killed and only low-rank hunters survived?"

"Rumor has it someone else was there, helping the survivors. Can you comment?"

Yoonho tried to ignore the reporters but eventually had no choice but to respond.

"The investigation by the association and the guild has wrapped up. There was an incident, but there was no other person. Members of the White Tiger Guild worked together to clear a high-rank dungeon. During that time, some hunters were either injured or killed. That's all I have for you."

A reporter pressed him. "Then why are the survivors being barred from speaking with the media?"

"They just endured a near-death experience. Must you bother them with your questions? No further comment." Yoonho got into his car and drove away.

Jinwoo was stunned.

Aren't they talking about me?

* * *

Not too long ago, on the East Coast of the United States…

A scream came from a dungeon. “Ahhhhhh!”

James collapsed onto the floor. His legs had given out, so he had to crawl across the floor only to realize he had backed himself against a wall.

“Shit!”

It was an A-rank dungeon. To close the A-rank gate, an appropriately elite team had been brought in, but all its members had been defeated—or to be more precise, knocked unconscious.

This can’t be happening!

James leaned against the wall, breathing hard and shaking his head over and over. He couldn’t believe it. When the raid team had first entered the dungeon, they hadn’t come across any magic beasts. Not a single one.

“A dungeon without magic beasts?”

“Is there such a thing?”

“So then where’s all the mana they detected outside the dungeon coming from?”

They’d all had different theories. As if this wasn’t incredible enough, something even more astounding had occurred in the boss’s lair. When they entered, they finally encountered a magic beast.

It looked just like a human, and this lone creature…had single-handedly knocked everyone out. It was that powerful. Only James had been able to escape from its lair. Barely.

Is all that mana coming from just that one magic beast?

The lair was quite far from the gate, yet the mana meter had still registered it as A rank.

James shook his head once more.

That's not possible.

And then…

"Huh… Well, well."

The magic beast stepped out of the shadows.

James screamed when he spotted it. "Gaaaahhh!"

"Geez, you're loud."

The magic beast…or no, the Asian man with long hair and a scraggly beard scratched the top of his head.

"Ah, ahhh…" James had devolved from screaming to moaning.

The man in front of him put his hands on his waist. "I mean, why did you guys have to go and attack me? I told you I was *human*, not a magic beast."

Unfortunately, James didn't understand the language the man was speaking. His face paled.

The Asian man looked exasperated by James, who still appeared terrified. "Guess I can't get through to this white guy."

Regardless, he tried again, attempting to sound kind while squatting at eye level with the white dude.

"Hey, hey." He dug deep to remember what English he could, but with his limited knowledge, he had no way of knowing if his grammar was correct or not.

"I'm Korean." He tried to pronounce each word as clearly as possible. "I…want…to go…home."

* * *

It was an unprecedented discovery. A human found inside a dungeon! It was all hands on deck at the Hunter Command Center.

The assistant director went straight to the interrogation room himself upon hearing the news. From one side of a two-way mirror, he could see an Asian male in handcuffs sitting quietly in a chair.

“Is that him?”

“Yes, sir.”

“He looks like a regular civilian, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, sir.”

He did look that way. With a haircut and a trimmed beard, he looked like any ordinary middle-aged Asian man.

“Do we know his identity?”

“He’s insisting he’s a Korean hunter.”

“Korean?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How did a Korean hunter come out of a dungeon located on the other side of the planet?”

“He said the gate closed ten years ago, and he got trapped inside.”

“And when he opened his eyes, he was here?”

“Yes, that’s what he’s claiming.”

The assistant director put his hand on his forehead.

How was he going to explain this to the director? He felt a headache coming on.

“So what’re you guys doing here? Get inside there and pry more information out of him.”

This was the type of matter where he'd have to report not only to the director but also the higher-ups. This was no time to be standing around.

But the manager in charge of the interrogation had a different theory. "Sir, we're also investigating the possibility that this may be a magic beast who simply possesses a human's memories."

"And?"

"If he reveals his true identity, all of Washington, DC, may be in danger, sir."

What he said made sense. A strike squad with several A-rank hunters had been helpless against this man. They needed to carefully plan their next move.

"We need a high-rank hunter to help with the investigation."

An S-rank one, if possible.

The manager nodded in agreement. "We have an S-rank hunter who can speak Korean in the vicinity."

The assistant director's face brightened. Given his position in the Hunter Command Center, he knew the list of S-rank hunters in the US like the back of his hand.

"Mr. Hwang! Is he on his way?"

"Yes, sir."

Dongsoo Hwang was the main hunter of the Scavenger Guild. The Hunter Command Center had gone out of their way to get American citizenship for Dongsoo.

With him here……

There would be nothing to worry about even if something went wrong. The assistant director smiled in relief.

“Oh, right.”

He’d almost forgotten. If he was going to report this to the director, he at least needed to know the subject’s name.

“What was that guy’s name again?”

It was hard to pronounce, so the manager checked the report his men had submitted.

“He claims his name is Ilhwan Sung.”

* * *

Dongsoo showed no mercy, especially to magic beasts. He’d been raised by his brother because their parents had died from a dungeon break, so he’d considered it a blessing when he became an S-rank awakened being.

I’ve been given a chance to tear apart all magic beasts!

Dongsoo’s eyes were icy as he entered the interrogation room.

Here was the man who’d come from a dungeon. He seemed to possess the same magic power signature as a magic beast.

If he’s a magic beast pretending to be human……

He would cut the man’s throat right then and there. That was why Dongsoo had accepted the Hunter Command Center’s request.

He made eye contact with the suspect.

……

……

They exchanged gazes.

Dongsoo placed the file with all the man’s information on the table, pulled up a chair, and sat down. “You better cooperate. The decision whether you’re a human being or a magic beast is in my hands.”

“Understood.”

Before Dongsoo began the official interrogation, he had a personal question. His older brother had died in a dungeon. Was there a possibility of Dongsuk coming back to life? That’s what he wanted to know first.

“Can other hunters come back like you?”

The man shook his head.

Dongsoo’s brow twitched. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know why I was able to come back.”

“Well? Why’s that?”

“Let me ask you something, too.”

“……I’m asking the questions here.” Dongsoo’s eyes narrowed.

The man ignored him and continued. “How much do you know about gates, magic beasts, and dungeon breaks?”

“……” Dongsoo was going to force the guy’s mouth shut if he’d asked a lame question.

He couldn’t do that, though, because these were topics countless people had been trying in vain to explain ever since the first gate had spawned and the first awakened beings started appearing ten years ago. Maybe today was the day everything would finally be made clear.

“Assistant Director.”

“Shhh.”

The employees of the Hunter Command Center held their breath in anticipation on the other side of the two-way mirror.

Dongsoo prodded him. “So are you saying you have the answer?”

“Dungeons, gates, and magic beasts…… They’re merely precursors to the real war that’s coming. And the being that poses the biggest threat has recently opened its eyes.”

“And the reason you’re here?”

“To stop the threat.”

“What is this big threat?”

“……I can’t tell you that.”

Dongsoo couldn’t help but laugh. “The man who says he’s here to stop a threat can’t reveal what the threat is? Whatever it is, wouldn’t it be easier with some help rather than doing it alone?”

The man shook his head. “Greater numbers will be no help when facing this being. All you amateurs working together will either be eaten or enslaved.”

“So you’re saying you’re the only one who can stop it?”

The man nodded affirmatively.

Dongsoo wasn’t impressed.

He’s gone off the deep end.

It was understandable considering he’d been stuck in a dungeon for ten years. Either that or the magic beast had completely misunderstood how to pass for human.

Dongsoo decided to play along. “I guess you’re quite confident in your abilities.”

“Let’s just say my skills aren’t the only factor.”

“Well, if you say so.”

What kind of information could Dongsoo get out of this lunatic?

He stopped asking questions and instead opened the man’s case file to verify his identity as the Hunter Command Center had asked.

“Your name is Ilhwan Sung…”

He looked identical to the picture on file.

He doesn’t look like he’s aged ten years.

But Dongsoo didn’t care about that. High-rank hunters were said to be able to stave off aging.

“Your résumé as a hunter is quite extensive. You would’ve made a lot of money in today’s world.”

Ilhwan said nothing. There had been no organizations for hunters during his time. There hadn’t even been a ranking system for hunters.

Dongsoo kept reading the document. “Your spouse is Kyunghye Park, and you have two children. A son named……”

As Dongsoo read the children’s profiles, his eyes went wide for a moment.

Jinwoo Sung?

It was a very brief moment, though. He tried to keep cool and continued.

“…Jinwoo Sung. And your daughter’s name is?”

“Jinah Sung.”

“Okay, next.”

“Wait.”

Ilhwan stopped Dongsoo before he could turn to the next page. Dongsoo calmly looked up. Ilhwan’s eyes were now every bit as icy as Dongsoo’s.

“Why did I sense hostile energy when you mentioned my son?”

“……”

Dongsoo dropped the file back onto the table and turned off the mic broadcasting to the other side of the window.

“I said, *I* ask the questions.”

“I’d like to hear your answer.”

“What if I don’t answer?”

“Then I guess I’d have to force you to talk.”

The look in Ilhwan’s eyes grew more intense. He had no intention of backing down.

Dongsoo grinned like the Cheshire Cat. “I see. So you’re a magic beast.”

How dare a magic beast threaten a hunter? The hostility Dongsoo felt from him was palpable. That was more than enough evidence that this man was actually a monster.

No, wait. This might be another blessing in disguise.

Having reached this conclusion, Dongsoo turned the mic back on.

Beep.

“Assistant Director, this man is a magic beast. He’s about to launch his attack, so you need to evacuate.”

“What? W-w-wait!”

Beep.

On the other side of the two-way mirror, people freaked out and quickly vacated the room. A siren started blaring throughout the building.

Dongsoo’s hands began to shimmer with a silver light.

“I’m planning to visit Korea soon.” He smiled sinisterly at Ilhwan. “What should I tell your son your last words were?”

* * *

The TV news continued reporting on the red gate scandal. Jinwoo felt a little lost.

This is getting out of control.

Still, he wasn't troubled, but it did feel strange. He found it odd that strangers who had nothing to do with the incident were trying to get word out about someone they didn't know. And if people discovered his identity? Well, it didn't matter anyway.

I've leveled up more than I ever planned to.

Initially, he'd wanted to hide his powers because he'd feared being used and taken advantage of. But now? He was able to slap away the hand of Yoonho Baek, the guild master of White Tiger and an S-rank hunter. That wasn't something he could even imagine his past self doing.

I would've been shaking like a leaf just making eye contact with him.

There was a wistful smile on his face. It would've been nice to enjoy a drink while waxing nostalgic.

Ping!

[A harmful substance has been detected.]

[Buff: Detoxing has been activated.]

[3, 2, 1… Detoxing is complete.]

It was too bad that wasn't allowed. Jinwoo smiled sadly but then put down the shot glass and grew serious.

I have no intention of stopping here.

He called up the stat window.

Ping!

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Class: Shadow Monarch]

[HP: 13,001]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 61]

[Title: The One Who Overcame Adversity (and 1 more)]

[MP: 1,677]

[Stats]

Strength:	142
Stamina:	101
Agility:	121
Intelligence:	89
Perception:	103

(Available ability points: 10)

Physical damage reduced by: 46 percent

Level 61. And because he'd invested all the reward points from the daily quest into intelligence, it was getting close to a hundred.

I still have a long way to go, though…

He could go higher to achieve even greater heights, possibly to a level no one else could reach. The thought made Jinwoo's heart race.

And it would all start with the Demon's Castle.

The system said it was the item I wanted.

He recalled the time he'd acquired the blessed mystery box.

[BLESSED MYSTERY BOX]

It will supply an item the Player wants.

From that, he'd received the key to the Demon's Castle. He knew from his earlier visit that it held both a high-rank monster and hot rewards. He didn't know what to expect from the upper floors of the castle, of course, but it couldn't be that different. Now it was time for the harvest.

Jinwoo decided to spend a few days there. He had only one worry.

Once I'm inside, no one can contact me……

What would he tell his sister? Jinwoo stood and figured he could come up with an excuse on the way home.

Tap, tap.

"Jinho."

Tap, tap.

"Jinho Yoo."

"Mm? Mmmmf…"

Jinwoo gently slapped and shook Jinho, but he was dead drunk. Now what?

He's supposed to take a test at the association tomorrow……

Never mind the test, he had to get home safely first. He fished out Jinho's phone.

"I can't call his dad, Chairman Yoo, or his brother, Jinsung…"

Who could Jinwoo call to pick up the little man and keep him out of trouble? He came across a name.

Suhyun Yoo?

Unlike his father or brother, Jinho had exchanged a lot of texts with her. It was definitely a woman's name…… Jinwoo thought about calling her but then put down the phone.

Wait.

He checked the shop just in case. He thought he'd seen… And there it was!

[ITEM: CONDITION RECOVERY POTION]
Acquisition Difficulty: E

Category: Consumable

Liquid that recovers your condition when you drink it. You may keep it in the inventory, but it cannot be transferred to another person.

A bottle appeared on the table once the purchase was finalized. In contrast to the red healing potion or blue mana potion, this one was bright yellow.

Jinwoo made sure no one was looking before pulling Jinho's head back and pouring the recovery potion into his mouth. After a moment…

Jinho's eyes popped open. "Boss?"

"You awake now?"

His head was tilted back, and Jinwoo was staring down at him.

“What’re you doing there, boss?”

“……”

Jinwoo didn’t know how to explain the situation, so he decided it was best to pretend that nothing had happened.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes, boss!” Jinho quickly rose to his feet but then cocked his head.

Huh? Why do I feel so refreshed?

Jinho stretched this way and that as he followed Jinwoo, feeling invigorated.

The news was still on in the background.

“In other news, the US government delayed the release of their official statement concerning the explosion at the Hunter Command Center…”

* * *

As soon as the sun was up, Jinwoo made his way to the Daesung Tower.

It’s as tall as I remember.

It was a hundred-story skyscraper, and looking up at it this close hurt Jinwoo’s neck.

But what’s with all the people?

Unlike the last time he’d been here, tons of people were coming and going from Daesung Tower. There was a big difference between the night and day crowds. Many people were walking the streets around the building.

Someone suddenly disappearing in a crowded place like this would definitely cause a commotion.

The media was already touting the mystery helper, so did he really need to draw attention to himself?

Of course not.

Jinwoo didn't like being the center of attention to begin with anyway.

He found a less-crowded area and took the Demon's Castle key out of the inventory. It was a long, tapered golden key that looked merely decorative at first glance.

Is there anyone around?

Jinwoo checked his surroundings.

Let's enter through here.

He activated Stealth.

Hwoom.

Now invisible, Jinwoo hit the streets, weaving through people as he headed toward the building.

Bump.

Bump.

Jinwoo bumped several shoulders despite doing his best to navigate the crowded sidewalk, but no one noticed him.

Someone could really abuse Stealth if they wanted to, huh?

He concluded that had to be why high-rank hunters with Stealth were closely monitored. This random thought didn't stay in his head for long.

Fwoooosh.

His surroundings completely transformed, just as they had when he'd first stepped across the invisible border.

I can already hear the sound of flames from over here, so how hot is it inside?

It was a flaming fortress. All Jinwoo could see was the Demon's Castle where Daesung Tower once stood. Humans really were adaptive animals.

I'm not as nervous as I was the first time.

The Demon's Castle definitely wasn't as intimidating as it had been the first time Jinwoo saw it. Or maybe…

It might be because I've leveled up so much.

He put the Demon's Castle's key back in inventory and took out a gray key.

[ITEM: CASTLE DOOR KEY]
Acquisition Difficulty: A

Category: Key

This key unlocks the door to the Demon's Castle. You can acquire this only when you kill the gatekeeper.

It was the castle door key Jinwoo had acquired after killing Cerberus, the gatekeeper. He hadn't dared to enter the castle last time because Cerberus had been such a challenge. Finally, he felt ready to use it.

Hwoom.

Next, he called up a weapon. Jinwoo held the gray key in his left hand and Barca's Dagger in his right as he walked cautiously toward the castle door. Cerberus was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe monsters don't respawn inside the Demon's Castle?

He couldn’t be certain, but there was a high possibility that, like Cerberus, once a monster was dead here, it couldn’t return.

Then……

That meant the structure of this dungeon might be different from the previous instance dungeons where monsters could respawn.

Jinwoo focused his perception stat.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

After increasing the perception stat to over one hundred, his own heartbeat sounded like thunder in his ears.

But it’s not fear.

Knowing how powerful he was now gave him confidence. Being tense and being scared were two different things.

Ping!

He received a message as he stood before the castle’s enormous gate.

[Would you like to enter using the castle door key?] (Y/N)

Did you think I was going to turn back now?

Jinwoo chose *Yes* as he grinned from the absurd question.

Crrreak…

Even though he hadn’t laid a finger on them, the two huge doors opened on their own, hinges creaking loudly.

Thud!

Huh……?

Jinwoo was startled. Even though his perception was focused, he didn’t sense any monsters inside the doors.

No monsters?

And here Jinwoo was worried about the opposite happening. He'd even entertained the idea of returning to the penalty zone to do some special training killing centipedes in case too many enemies attacked him at once.

But……

What was this? He felt like he had wasted his time. The interior was bare.

Haah… Are you serious?

Jinwoo sent Barca's Dagger back to his inventory and stepped inside the Demon's Castle. As soon as he did…

Ping!

Jinwoo called up two daggers as fast as lightning, but it was just a notification chime.

Huh?

[A new quest has arrived.]

A quest has arrived?

Not the daily quest? Thinking back, the notification couldn't have been for the daily quest, since he'd completed that earlier and had collected all the rewards before coming here. That meant it was a regular quest……

Well, first time for everything.

So far, I've only been given hidden or urgent quests.

That wasn't counting the daily quest that he received every day whether he liked it or not. Jinwoo took a look at the message.

Read.

The quest details popped up.

Ping!

[QUEST: GATHER DEMON SOULS (1)]

The Demon's Castle is filled with demons. Defeat the demons and collect their souls to acquire special rewards.

Demons each have at least one soul, but some demons on higher floors possess multiple souls.

Quest Activation Requirement: Enter the Demon's Castle

Quest Clear Requirement: 10,000 demon souls

Rewards:

1. Your choice of any 1 item

2. All stats +20

3. Mystery Reward

A twenty-point boost! That was the first thing that caught Jinwoo's eye.

I can increase intelligence by twenty points!

He couldn't contain his grin. He'd recently discovered the pain of not having enough mana.

I need a lot of mana so my shadow soldiers can respawn.

But it wasn't just about mana. He'd also confirmed that the number of shadows he could extract and store went up as his intelligence increased. That was why he desperately needed to raise the intelligence stat.

I can only increase it so much with level-ups and daily quests……

If he could get twenty bonus ability points as a quest reward, all his problems would be solved at once.

Gulp.

On top of that…

Jinwoo looked at the line above.

[REWARDS]

1. Your choice of any 1 item

2. All stats +20

He was already thankful for the bonus ability points, but he could also choose any item he wanted.

Can I really choose anything?

Jinwoo thought of all the expensive weapons in the shop.

I'm sure I saw……

There were S-rank items that cost between a few billion to 10 billion. That was 10 billion gold, not cash, which was the currency of the system. But the price didn't concern him.

Knight Killer, one of the weapons he was using now, was worth the 3 million gold he'd paid.

If a B-rank item worth 3 million gold is this powerful and effective, what would an S-rank item costing tens of billions, or even hundreds of billions, be like?

His curiosity was piqued. Never mind the mystery reward. Just looking at those two payouts, he couldn't afford to fail.

Killing one or two monsters for these kinds of rewards would be a cakewalk.

Jinwoo was excited to complete the quest quickly and claim his rewards but was shocked when he saw the quest clear requirement.

"Ten thousand?!" he shouted.

That was way beyond one or two monsters.

Isn't this just hard labor?

No one in their right mind would attempt to defeat ten thousand of these monsters without knowing what they were up against, but Jinwoo smiled rather mischievously.

No one alone, that is……

Currently, he had fifty shadow soldiers. If each soldier killed a couple hundred, then he could meet the quota. If he pushed his soldiers, like he said, it would be a cakewalk.

[Will you accept Quest: Collect Demon Souls (1)?]

Of course.

There was no reason to decline.

[You have accepted the quest.]

The penalty for failing would just be a waste of his time.

If I compare it to the other quests……

This was a dream compared with the job-change quest or the urgent quests where he'd had to risk his own life.

Jinwoo looked up.

Is that thing for keeping count?

A counter had appeared above him as soon as he accepted.

[Demon souls collected: 0/10,000]

It's a long road to ten thousand……

Until now, the goal had been an abstract concept in his head, but seeing the number, he could only laugh at how ridiculous the whole situation was. Another counter appeared in midair to his left.

Huh?

[Experience points needed to level up: 60,000]

The number sixty thousand was displayed on a hologram. Once he hit that, he would level up.

I can see my experience point count from now on?

He'd never seen anything like this before entering the castle.

Let's see……

Jinwoo took a step back and exited the Demon's Castle. Both the soul and experience counters disappeared. When he went back in, they reappeared as if nothing had happened.

They're only active inside the Demon's Castle.

He was disappointed he couldn't see his experience points outside the castle, but at least it would be very convenient while he was inside. There was, however, another way to look at it.

Does this mean this raid is going to take a while?

He'd assumed that was possible. Jinwoo carefully read over the quest details once more and then closed the stat window.

That's enough of that.

Jinwoo was finally able to take a proper look around the interior of the Demon's Castle.

What the……?

Jinwoo was floored.

Hwooooooooo…

Beyond the gate was a city in ruins. He'd unexpectedly entered an outdoor dungeon.

What's this? Is this Seoul?

Is this what Seoul would look like if all the humans died and a hundred years passed? Within this gray, lifeless city, nothing moved except some flickering streetlights.

I didn't expect an outdoor dungeon…

What's more, it was a dungeon that resembled metropolitan Seoul. Other instance dungeons that had resembled real locations like a subway station or a department store paled in comparison to the sheer scale of this place.

Jinwoo turned toward the horizon.

Which way should I go?

What was his destination? Jinwoo surveyed the area. He didn't have to debate for long.

In the distance, a large beam of light stretched toward the sky from the location where N Seoul Tower should've been.

Let's go there.

Jinwoo began walking in that direction. He took note of where the door was, just in case he got lost. However, he was forced to stop rather quickly.

Kik-kik.

K-ki-kik.

One by one, small monsters sluggishly emerged from in between buildings.

[Low-Rank Demon]

Jinwoo was able to identify the creatures by the dark-red letters above their heads.

They look just like……

They looked like wingless gargoyles. There were eight demons in total.

Jinwoo's mouth formed a sly grin.

That's eight souls to start.

In a flash…

Shhhk!

Barca's Dagger struck one of the creatures in the forehead.

[You have defeated a low-rank demon.]

[You have acquired 100 experience points.]

[You have acquired 1 demon soul.]

Kree?

Krawk?

While the other demons focused on the one killed by a dagger, Jinwoo got closer to another and separated its head from its neck.

Shunk!

[You have defeated a low-rank demon.]

[You have acquired 100 experience points.]

[You have acquired 1 demon soul.]

This one also gave Jinwoo one hundred experience points.

I need sixty thousand……

That meant he could level up if he killed six hundred of these low-rank demons. He quickly finished off those remaining.

Kreeeee!

Kak!

He'd collected eight souls and acquired eight hundred experience points.

Not bad.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and Jinwoo's eyes flashed as he went on the hunt for his next prey.

* * *

In the president's office of the White Tiger Guild, President Baek was reviewing some documents he had been neglecting due to being so busy the last few days.

Beeeep.

He picked up the phone receiver.

"Sir, Hunter Byunggu Min would like to speak with you."

"Please connect me."

"Yes, sir."

Within moments, a familiar voice came over the phone.

"Baek, bro, why'd you turn off your cell?"

Yoonho took a deep breath. "Because of the reporters. I'm laying low until things quiet down."

"Oh, the red gate! It was on the news here in Japan, too. You looked good on TV, you know?"

"Don't mess with me. I'm not in the mood for jokes. If I find out whoever tipped off the media, I'm gonna…"

"Relax, dude. It'll blow over soon. There's bigger news."

"Bigger news? In Japan?"

"Yup. Things have gotten more serious than we thought. It'll eventually be on the news in Korea, too."

"Why? What is it?"

A week ago, the hunter organization in Japan had secretly contacted the Hunter's Association and all the major Korean guilds, saying they wanted to consult Korean hunters on a matter. Two days after that, several hunters representing Korea had traveled to Japan. Byunggu had been one of them.

Yoonho was curious about the details. “Stop beating around the bush and spit it out. This is the first damn time Japan’s ever asked us for advice. What’s all the fuss about? What’s up with those snooty assholes?”

“Dude…… You remember the ants from Jeju Island?”

An S-rank gate had spawned on Jeju Island four years ago. Ants had broken out of that dungeon. Three extermination operations had failed. Eventually, the Korean government had given up on Jeju Island, which was now overrun by magic beasts.

“How could I forget? I almost got killed there.”

“There might be mutants.”

“Mutants? Who cares? Let them fight one another.”

“The thing is……”

The voice over the phone sounded troubled.

“The carcass of an ant with wings was found off the coast of Japan.”

9

A Smooth Start

9
A SMOOTH START

[You have defeated a low-rank demon.]

[You have acquired 100 experience points.]

[You have acquired 1 demon soul.]

.

.

[You have defeated a low-rank demon.]

[You have acquired 100 experience points.]

[You have acquired 1 demon soul.]

For two straight hours, Jinwoo killed low-rank demons every chance he got. He checked the soul counter.

[Demon souls collected: 309/10,000]

He'd completed 3 percent of the quest. If he was able to keep hunting at this speed, he calculated that he could level up in the next two hours. His current level was 61. To go from level 60 to level 61, it had taken him nine different C-rank dungeons and two whole days. But here he could level up in four hours?

That's insane.

There was a smile on his face. When was the last time he'd enjoyed hunting this much?

Was that the last time?

He recalled his time at Hapjeong Station when he'd kept going back and forth between the first and second basement floors until his level wouldn't increase any further.

Kree!

Whenever Jinwoo's dagger flashed, without fail, at least one demon fell.

Kreeee!

Kik!

Ki-kik! Kree!

Sometimes, several fell. Once again, he defeated twenty low-rank demons in a blink of an eye.

This is awesome.

His experience points and the number of souls went up as the number of demons around him went down. Plus, there were item drops, too. Jinwoo grinned as he collected them.

Horns drop almost every time.

[ITEM: LOW-RANK DEMON'S HORNS]
Acquisition Difficulty: None

Category: Miscellaneous

Two small horns from a low-rank demon's head. Demon's horns are considered high-quality materials and can be sold at a high price.

The demon's horns. He could make 20,000 gold just by selling them in the shop.

The shop paid 15,000 each for the Cerberus fangs last time…… Monsters in the Demon's Castle are quite generous, aren't they?

Miscellaneous items were no longer junk to Jinwoo, because he'd discovered how useful the shop could be to him. Gold could become a tremendous boon later.

There's really nothing to throw away.

Jinwoo searched the dead demons' bodies for drops to either sell to the shop or store in his inventory. As he did…

What do we have here?

He found an item he'd never seen before. Something was protruding from the abdomen of a demon.

[ITEM: ENTRY PERMIT]
Acquisition Difficulty: ??

Category: ??

This permit grants access to the second floor of the Demon's Castle. It can be used only on the magic teleportation circle on the first floor.

It was a rolled-up scroll.

Entry permit?

When Jinwoo opened the document, he took in diagrams and writings he couldn't decipher or read. Ultimately, the only helpful information came from the item description.

An item that lets me go from the first floor to the second……

Could this be? Jinwoo looked around the area. He was inside the Demon's Castle, but he was also inside Daesung Tower. If the castle was divided into floors like the tower, then this was the ground floor.

I didn't think there would be different floors because this is an outdoor dungeon, but……

Could the dungeon consist of a hundred floors like Daesung Tower? He was awed by the size of this place.

……There can't really be a hundred floors, can there?

There was only one way to find out. He had to uncover the magic circle.

There's only one place that magic teleportation circle can be……

Jinwoo focused on the beam of light stretching toward the sky.

Over there.

He'd been heading in that direction at first but had gotten sidetracked by the temptation of hunting low-rank demons.

I guess I should head over there now.

He thought it was time to go. Besides, it looked like he had killed all the low-rank demons in the area anyway. That brought a smile to his face.

Summon.

Unlike extraction, summoning the shadow soldiers didn't require a particular phrase. He just had to will them to come out.

Hwoom.

The enormous shadow beast that had been extracted from the ice bear leader's shadow materialized before Jinwoo.

Grrrrrrr.

The big black bear stood on his hind legs. He was as huge as a house, but responding to Jinwoo, he was no different from a well-trained puppy.

"Down, boy."

Grr.

The magic beast soldier went back on all fours, and Jinwoo mounted him.

“Hya!” As soon as he rapped the bear’s side, the beast started running at top speed toward the beam of light.

Thud, thud, thud, thud!

Because of his speed, the shadow beast covered a lot of ground quickly.

Even when obstacles got in his way…

Kreeee!

Kik-kik!

Graaaawr!

He cleared them with one quick swipe of his massive paw.

Whoa.

Jinwoo was proud of his soldier.

I thought I’d ride him for fun, but this is pretty awesome.

Foreseeing that he’d be doing this quite a lot, he decided to give his new ride a name.

“From now on, your name is Tank.”

“Graaaaawr!”

The shadow beast, Tank, raised his head and roared. Did that mean he liked the name or not? Jinwoo wasn’t sure what the roar was supposed to convey, since the bear’s voice was always that loud.

They soon approached the beam of light. Tank began to slow down and eventually stopped right in front of their destination.

“Good job.” Jinwoo dismounted, petted him affectionately, and returned the bear to his shadow.

He turned forward.

He heard the familiar *ping!*

[You have discovered the magic teleportation circle.]

The magic circle was engraved on the ground, and the light emanating from it reached to the sky.

He stepped inside the circle.

……

Nothing happened. A little confused, Jinwoo walked a little farther and stood in the middle of the circle.

[No floors have been opened.]

[Which floor would you like to teleport to?]

“How many floors are there?”

There was no answer.

Do I have to find out for myself?

Jinwoo considered this for a moment. Should he finish leveling up before going, since he was close to meeting the requirement, or should he proceed and level up as he went?

Monsters don’t respawn here like in other instance dungeons, so staying on one floor is limiting.

Besides, there were demons with more than one soul on the higher floors. Jinwoo concluded it would be better both for his experience and for completing the quest to head up as soon as possible.

All right.

Up it was.

Jinwoo spoke aloud. “Second floor.”

[An entry permit is required.]

At the prompt, Jinwoo took the scroll out of his inventory, and it immediately dissolved into light.

[Floor two of the Demon’s Castle has been unlocked.]

[Teleporting to floor two.]

Vwoooom…

An intense illumination emanated from the magic teleportation circle. Jinwoo realized something in that moment.

Oh… So this is…

It was simply an elevator. Right when Jinwoo came to that realization, he was teleported to the second floor in a brilliant flash of light.

* * *

Second floor, third floor, fourth floor… All the way to the twenty-seventh. That was what Jinwoo managed to accomplish in two days. He had told Jinah that he was going on a weeklong trip.

I have five days left.

Considering that the speed at which Jinwoo was clearing the floors was increasing, he thought it might not even take five days to reach the top.

He took a quick look at his surroundings. The landscape was desolate.

I can’t even tell which city this is supposed to be.

Each floor was modeled after a different city. However, as the floors got higher, the locales looked more and more devastated. By the twenty-seventh floor, Jinwoo couldn't figure out where he was supposed to be. Was this what cities would look like after being carpet-bombed?

Jinwoo shook his head to get rid of the thought.

I'm wasting time.

He checked his wristwatch, which told him it was eleven PM. There was no day or night here, so he was relying on his watch to tell him. If it was eleven o'clock, then it was time to sleep so he could recharge for tomorrow's battles.

But first…

Should I check where I'm at?

Jinwoo examined his progress.

[Demon souls collected: 2,116/10,000]

Twenty-one hundred souls…

About a thousand demons a day. That was a lot of demons to catch in two days. Ten thousand was still a long ways away, but he had high hopes for the demons with multiple souls on the higher floors.

I need to push toward those higher floors.

Next, he checked his level.

"Wha…?"

Jinwoo couldn't believe his eyes.

[Level: 67]

His level had risen to level 67 in a heartbeat. Low-rank demons netted him only a hundred experience points, but thanks to mid-rank

demons that netted him three hundred points, he was leveling up quickly.

It's making good progress.

Plenty of monsters, a high yield of experience points, and the right level of difficulty made the Demon's Castle the best place to level up.

And his level wasn't the only thing going up. Jinwoo's proficiency with his different skills was increasing as well.

Even now, Knight Killer floated in midair over his palm. Ruler's Hand, the power to physically move an object without touching it. Even when resting, Jinwoo took the time to practice his skills.

Since Ruler's Hand doesn't require mana anyway…

Practicing involved maintaining concentration, which was a little tiring, but it was a small price to pay to improve his proficiency. And he was rewarded for his efforts.

[Ruler's Hand has leveled up!]

Nice!

Jinwoo leaned against a wall with a smile across his face. It put him at ease whenever he got a little stronger.

His eyes slowly closed.

Oh, Jinho should've gotten his guild master's license by now.

Jinwoo wondered how he was doing. Perhaps because it had been quite some time since he'd worked alone, he suddenly thought of Jinho trailing after him. The elder son was a successful businessman, and the younger son held a guild master's license but was still in college. That was going to be a minefield.

You can do it, Jinho.

He drifted off to sleep as he cheered Jinho on in his heart.

* * *

Jinho entered the fancy traditional Korean restaurant with a determined look on his face. He'd picked the place himself, based on his father's tastes.

"Is Chairman Yoo here yet?"

"Yes, he's already arrived."

Jinho took a labored breath.

"This way, please."

The server led him to a private room where his father, Myunghan, was seated.

Creeeeak.

Jinho's anxiety shot up a few notches as the server pulled back the sliding door and Jinho saw his father's face. He felt vulnerable for a moment, but Jinho strengthened his resolve and took a seat across from his father.

"What's this about? This is the first time you've asked to meet me like this."

"Father, please take a look at this before I explain."

"This is……?"

"It's my guild master's license and a record of the raids I've gone on."

"A guild master's……license? You?" Myunghan's surprise was evident, so Jinho nodded with a smile.

"Yes, Father."

Myunghan took a look at the documents. He saw something interesting that put a gleam in his eye.

"……"

But his silence was causing Jinho's heart to race and making it hard to breathe.

"So." Myunghan pushed the documents aside before he continued. "Are you saying you want to be in charge of the Yoojin Guild?"

"That's right, Father."

"Hmm……" In that moment, Myunghan appeared torn.

I can't believe he's actually debating between my brother and me.

Jinho was thrilled. This was already a win for him. In the past, he would've been satisfied to have gotten this far, but he had no intention of backing down today.

"As you already know, it's too risky to hand over that kind of power to someone outside the family, and—"

"Enough." Myunghan raised his hand.

Jinho stopped talking immediately. His father's "enough" was an absolute order that no one in the family could defy.

"There is someone I want to introduce you to."

"Pardon?" Jinho was puzzled.

He'd been the one who'd organized this meeting, but his father had brought someone along? Who could it be?

As Jinho's curiosity rose, the door on the other side of the room slid open.

"H-hello……" A man around his late twenties or early thirties awkwardly greeted Jinho.

Who was this? Try as he might, Jinho didn't recognize the man.

Myunghan gestured for the fellow to sit beside him. "This is……Hunter Myunghwan Ko."

Myunghwan Ko?

Jinho cocked his head. He'd never heard that name before.

His father nodded as if he was already aware of this.

"He's from the White Tiger Guild, one of the survivors of the recent red gate incident."

Jinho didn't know how to react.

……"Red gate"?

Why was his father talking about that? It was a huge scandal, so Jinho had heard the story but couldn't figure out the connection between that and this meeting.

Besides, the man is……

A survivor. What was someone the media had been dying to interview doing here? Jinho could hardly contain his curiosity.

Myunghan observed Jinho before saying anything. "I guess you don't know."

"Pardon?"

Myunghan ignored his confused son for a moment and turned to the nervous-looking Myunghwan.

"Hunter Ko."

"Yes, sir."

"Please tell my son about who was also there that day other than the White Tiger Guild trainees."

"Understood."

Myunghwan's attention turned to Jinho. Jinho unintentionally made eye contact with him, and the hunter could almost see a question mark floating over Jinho's head.

Myunghwan said, "A young female hunter who looked like a high school student…"

A young female hunter?

Jinho couldn't have imagined whose name would come out of Myunghwan's mouth next.

"……and Jinwoo Sung."

Thump.

Jinho thought he could hear the sound of his heart sinking.

B-b-boss was in the red gate?

How had that happened? His scrambled brain got even more befuddled. Then he recalled something.

Wait, now that I think about it……

Jinwoo had spoken to Songyi like they were close even though he'd never acknowledged her presence before then.

"And the name of the young female hunter?"

"It's Songyi Han."

No way. Jinho's jaw dropped. He now understood the secret to their relationship.

Does that mean……?

This "helper" the media kept speculating about was…

Myunghwan quickly confirmed what Jinho was thinking. "Songyi and us White Tiger members got out of the red gate alive because of Jinwoo Sung."

Ha…ha-ha……

What had the boss been doing there? Jinho was half-surprised and half-delighted.

For a moment, he forgot his father was there and asked, "What happened inside the red gate?"

Myunghwan turned to Jinho's father for permission, and the chairman nodded his approval.

Myunghwan had been dying to tell the story and continued excitedly. "So what happened was……"

Jinho paid close attention.

"In the beginning, we were confused why two E-rank hunters were going to observe our training……"

Myunghwan told the story like a child bragging about a present he'd just received. Eventually…

"An A-rank hunter?!"

Myunghwan wasn't the only one excited now. "Exactly! He opened his hand just like this, and *smack!* Chul went down in a flash."

"Whoa……"

Hearing about Jinwoo's exploits had Jinho's heart racing.

That's just like the boss.

Taking down high-rank magic beasts with his bare hands was nothing for him, but Jinho didn't know he could one-hit KO an A-rank hunter. He felt touched and proud that he was partners with such an incredible person.

Myunghwan continued his story. "When the ice elves appeared, we thought we were goners for sure, but……"

Maybe it was because they were so focused on Myunghwan, but time flew by in the blink of an eye. It was a long story, but Myunghwan was nearing its conclusion.

He got a bit loud and overzealous in the end. "It was unbelievable! Jinwoo is the savior of everyone who was there!"

Jinho was nodding in agreement without even realizing it. He related to how Myunghwan felt. He'd been saved by Jinwoo, too.

"The guild forbade us from telling anyone about Jinwoo. I already had a problem with the guild's decision, but then Chairman Yoo contacted me, so—"

At that moment, the chairman politely cut in. "Hunter Myunghwan Ko."

"Sir?"

"I think that's enough."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got carried away." Myunghwan bowed his head in embarrassment.

The chairman turned to his son again. "So an unexpected name came up while I was gathering information about Hunter Jinwoo Sung."

He held up his index finger, then pointed to Jinho's name in one of the documents. It was the document of the raids Jinho had handed him earlier. He moved his finger smoothly across the document and stopped at "Jinwoo Sung."

Strike squad leader Jinho Yoo. Strike squad member Jinwoo Sung. Jinho couldn't deny the evidence.

I'm busted……

His father had found out that Jinwoo had helped him get his guild master's license.

Jinho tensed.

"Hunter Jinwoo Sung was a big help in getting your guild master's license. Do you admit that?"

"……I do."

"Do you have anything else to add?"

"……"

Jinho thought it was curtains for him. Since the chairman had discovered that Jinwoo had intervened in the process of obtaining Jinho's guild master's license, his father would question Jinho's ability to take charge of the Yoojin Guild.

……

His father gave him the look. Jinho felt his hands shake as they always had in the past because of that look.

Yet……

He couldn't give up just like that. For the first time in his life, he stood up to his father. He lowered his head but raised his voice.

"Won't you let me take charge of the Yoojin Guild?"

"Fine."

"Huh?" Jinho's head snapped up at his father's unexpected response.

"You may have the guild."

"What……?"

"You said it yourself. It's too risky to hand over that kind of power to someone outside of the family. Why take that risk when I have you?"

"B-but I tried to deceive you, and……"

"So did you think I was going to punish you and then kick you out?"

Could it be? Jinho thought his father was smiling, even though his mouth was closed and his lips were straight as usual.

"Had you been careless and raided dungeons recklessly, I might've done that. But I don't remember raising a fool."

Jinho suddenly turned red.

I would've been punished and disowned if it wasn't for you, boss.

No, he would've been killed before that happened. Jinho's mind was finally at ease.

"But there is one condition."

"Yes, sir."

"Can you……bring Hunter Jinwoo Sung into the Yoojin Guild?"

Jinho's eyes widened. "Bring the boss?"

Boss?

Myunghan's curiosity was piqued for a fleeting moment.

"Yes, exactly."

Jinho was at a loss.

Hnnngh……

Even little kids could've told him he needed to project confidence in front of his father. But the other party in question was the boss. Asking wouldn't be an issue, but still… So Jinho told the truth.

"I don't know."

"Of course not. No one said meeting this condition would be easy." The chairman drank some water and then dried his mouth with a handkerchief. "Fail, and I will turn the guild over to your brother. Still care to try?"

Jinho's face shone with determination.

I worked hard to get this far……

If he gave up now, he wouldn't be able to look Jinwoo in the eye.

Jinho replied with added resolve. "I'll give it a go."

"Good."

With that, the deal between father and son was struck. Myunghan nodded without saying another word as Jinho got up and bowed

before taking his leave. Myunghan removed the handkerchief from his mouth. It had been hard to keep a smile off his face.

That boy……

He'd actually asked to be in charge of the Yoojin Guild. He'd had an inkling of what Jinho wanted when he requested the meeting, but he hadn't expected his son to be so plucky.

A tiger cub is still a tiger, after all.

The smile spread across his face.

Chairman Myunghan Yoo is smiling!

The stony chairman was infamous for not showing emotion, whether happy or sad.

As Myunghwan stared at the chairman in fascination, Myunghan turned to ask him:

"Do you have anything else to say, Hunter Ko?"

Startled, Myunghwan hastily shook his head. "N-no, sir."

* * *

……Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. Jinwoo hit the higher floors at an incredible pace.

[You have defeated a mid-rank demon.]

[You have acquired 300 experience points.]

[You have acquired 1 demon soul.]

.

.

[You have defeated a mid-rank demon.]

[You have defeated a mid-rank demon.]

He expected to feel tired, but seeing his experience points and soul counter increase with each kill chased away the exhaustion.

[Demon souls collected: 4,388/10,000]

Still less than half?

It seemed like he'd been hunting demons nonstop since he got here, but that goal of ten thousand still felt out of reach.

But his level…

[Level: 69]

He'd leveled up twice in one day. Although it wasn't rising as quickly as it had at the start, it was still increasing faster than the rate of the soul counter. Even now, his experience points continued to rise.

Kreeee!

[……a mid-rank demon.]

[You have acquired 300 experience points.]

[You have acquired……]

"Whew!" Jinwoo stretched his back and scanned the area after killing the last demon he'd come across.

Countless cadavers lay at the feet of his soldiers standing at attention.

Clap, clap.

Jinwoo applauded them gleefully. "Well done."

The battle-weary soldiers returned to his shadow instantly. Soldiers could pick up essence stones, but Jinwoo was the only one who could gather items.

[Would you like to acquire……?]

He had to answer each message from the system.

This is pretty inconvenient.

This was why he fought solo when there weren't many demons and alongside his soldiers when a large contingent appeared. Once the fight was over, the collecting started.

Why did Jinho ask to keep doing this job? Is this fun for him?

Jinwoo chuckled as he grabbed an item from a dead monster's body.

Another inconvenience was that it wasn't possible to extract shadows in the Demon's Castle. It didn't matter whether it was a mid- or low-rank demon—the black smoke that indicated possible extraction never appeared. No matter how long he stared at the corpse…

[The mana is contaminated.]

[You cannot extract a shadow.]

The only message he received was that he couldn't extract a shadow because its mana was contaminated.

Well, there's nothing I can do.

As he searched the bodies while feeling disappointed, a message came up.

Ping!

[You have discovered 29 Items: Mid-Rank Demon's Horns.]

[Would you like to acquire all?]

Jinwoo beamed.

Of course!

He forgot his disappointment regarding shadow extraction as soon as he took stock of all the items.

Nothing I can use for myself.

Sell all! A large amount of gold was added to his balance after he dumped the miscellaneous items on the shop.

[Balance: 914,690,772 gold]

Whoa! Jinwoo inadvertently checked his balance and was floored. He had over 900 million in gold.

Well, I've killed more than four thousand demons, and each horn is two hundred thousand, so…

Because he profited from selling items each time, the gold was piling up.

Should I buy an S-rank weapon now?

He shook his head. Just because he had a lot of gold, there was no need to spend it unnecessarily.

I'm sure I'll find a need for it someday.

Jinwoo dusted off his hands after closing the inventory. He was done clearing the area and had acquired the entry permit for the fifty-first floor some time ago, so all he had to do was get on the elevator. But……

He looked toward the beam of light. Something was standing a little ways in front of the magic circle.

It was a huge demon flanked by several high-rank demons. Jinwoo glanced up. The demon's name was floating in black letters.

[Avaricious Vulcan, Lord of the Lower Floors]

Its hefty body looked like it weighed several tens or even hundreds of tons. In its hand, the creature held a large and deadly-looking club.

But Jinwoo had a smile on his face.

So that's the mid-boss, is it?

He only had good memories of the bosses from the instance dungeons, mainly because of the large amount of experience points and excellent item drops. Compared to magic beast bosses, which were a real challenge but yielded few rewards, monster bosses were like presents.

What kind of loot would that creature give him?

Whew.

Jinwoo took a deep breath and grinned.

10

AVARICIOUS VULCAN

10
AVARICIOUS VULCAN

Shall we?

Shadow soldiers materialized in rows behind Jinwoo. Not only was the infantry there, but the mage soldiers, shadow beasts, and the two knights were standing at attention as well.

Jinwoo took point, and the two knights stepped forward and flanked him. Jinwoo looked at Igris on his right and Iron on his left and smiled in satisfaction.

How dependable.

Even though it was Jinwoo's own skill, the fact that he had colleagues who had his back was reassuring.

However…

Clashing head-on would be……

It'd be very dangerous. The main issue was the club Vulcan was brandishing.

I'm amazed that there was a tree tall enough.

Vulcan looked like it could bat away all the soldiers with one swing.

It's fine if they fall, but…

The real problem was the mana needed to regenerate the fallen ranks. It was obvious he would quickly run out of mana if he had to keep regenerating soldiers pummeled by that ridiculous weapon. That meant there was only one way to do this.

I'll flay that big chunk of meat myself.

He'd let the soldiers handle the lackeys while he took care of Vulcan. Jinwoo decided that would be the best course of action.

I just have to attack without taking damage.

Unlike his soldiers, he was confident he could avoid Vulcan's attacks. In order to accomplish that, the first thing he had to do was separate Vulcan from its minions.

Jinwoo ordered the mage soldiers to attack first.

Draw Vulcan's subordinates to us using range attacks and then subdue Vulcan in a head-to-head battle.

It was a clear and simple plan.

Now.

Jinwoo gave the signal, and the mages shot fireballs from their hands.

Fwoom!

Fwoom!

KABOOM!

The opening salvo exploded near Vulcan's army.

Ping!

[Avaricious Vulcan, Lord of the Lower Floors, has detected intruders!]

[Vulcan's guard has detected……]

[Vulcan's guard has detected……]

Ping, ping, ping!

Warning notifications rang in quick succession. Vulcan and his minions simultaneously turned toward Jinwoo as the alerts sounded.

Good……

Jinwoo had succeeded in getting their attention. He used Stealth to become invisible in order to sneak behind and attack Vulcan.

Hwoom.

Everything was going according to plan…or so he thought.

Tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-thump!

……!

Unexpectedly, Vulcan charged toward them first.

Huh? It's like watching a fast-forwarded video!

Vulcan was standing before the shadow soldiers in the blink of an eye.

Shit!

Jinwoo panicked. It was unimaginable for a monster the size of a mountain to move that fast.

Hmmmm! Vulcan hefted its club.

Before the blow could strike the exposed mage soldiers, Iron appeared out of nowhere, holding up his shield.

Hwoosh…

Clang!

Iron had narrowly blocked the attack, but……both his arms were destroyed. The toughest among the shadow soldiers was incapacitated after one blow.

Ca-clank.

Iron's shattered arms fell to the ground in pieces.

Hmm? Hmm? Unsatisfied with the results, Vulcan examined its club, thinking the last strike had been lacking.

But that didn't last long. The monster struck with its club again.

Hmm!

Krrrrk!

Unable to defend himself, Iron and the mage soldiers behind him were demolished.

As he witnessed this, something inside Jinwoo snapped.

That bastard……

He bit his lower lip…and impulsively jumped into action.

Tmp!

Jinwoo was already flying toward Vulcan before he realized what he was doing. He was locked on to his target. Despite its massive, mountain-like frame, Vulcan's head was like a mere lump on its body. Jinwoo twisted his torso in midair, and his muscles bulged as he pulled back his shoulder and arm. As he focused all his power on his tightly clenched right fist, he became visible again.

Hmm?

Vulcan spotted Jinwoo a little too late. By then, Jinwoo's fist was already about to make contact with its nose.

Fwish!

Faster than a speeding bullet, the fist slammed into the side of Vulcan's face.

Blam!

Vulcan was sent reeling. It tumbled and rolled, unable to arrest its momentum, until it crashed into the ruins of an old building.

THUD!

The rickety framework collapsed on top of the demon.

Tmp.

Jinwoo stuck his landing lightly and stared in disbelief.

How did Vulcan get thrown so easily?

He looked down at his own fist in disbelief. It didn't have the tiniest scratch on it, even after hitting such a huge target. A thought popped into his head.

Oh, right……

He raised his head, and the stat window appeared in front of him as soon as he called for it.

[Stats]

Strength:	150
Stamina:	109
Agility:	139
Intelligence:	109
Perception:	111

……That's right.

He'd earned assassin-type skills, and his job was a mage-type, so he'd been forgetting one thing.

[Strength: 150]

……

Although he usually invested most of his ability points in intelligence, his strength stat was almost one and a half times higher.

I really went all-out with investing in strength.

Plus, his level had exploded recently. Here was the result of that.

Jinwoo looked over at Vulcan, stuck under the rubble, and had to laugh.

“Ha-ha……”

He hadn’t felt it when he was fighting regular monsters like low- and mid-rank demons, but he definitely did after punching that boss-rank monster.

Oh man…… I’ve gotten so much stronger.

He clenched his fist and basked in the feeling of exhilaration.

Just then, he heard that familiar chime.

Ping!

What is it?

He looked around.

Hmm? Hmm? Vulcan was getting up, using its club like a cane.

Was that a warning about the monster coming to?

Had the system always been that concerned for him? Jinwoo soon understood the reason for the warning.

[Avaricious Vulcan, Lord of the Lower Floors, has used Skill: Rage.]

Huh?

Ping, ping, ping!

The alert kept ringing.

[Vulcan will be in a continued state of rage.]

[All of Vulcan's abilities will be increased by 50 percent.]

[Vulcan will feel less pain.]

That skill……?

Even before Jinwoo could recall what had happened with Cerberus, Vulcan charged him with bloodshot eyes.

Tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-thump!

The ground shook with each thunderous footstep.

Jinwoo glanced over his shoulder. The battle between Vulcan's minions and his shadow soldiers raged behind him.

"Graaaaawr!"

Kreeee!

Jinwoo searched for Iron in the melee. A testament to Vulcan's powerful blows, Iron still hadn't fully regenerated.

"Iron!" shouted Jinwoo.

As he did, Iron threw his shield to the hunter. Jinwoo caught it, but when he spun around, Vulcan had already reached him.

If I don't block its attack, my soldiers will sustain damage.

It'd be difficult to kill Vulcan and all its henchmen without his soldiers, so he chose to protect them as much as he could. Jinwoo raised the shield and braced his arms for impact.

Hmm! Vulcan smashed down its club.

Bam!

Bam!

Bam!

Despite not being able to catch a breath during Vulcan's relentless onslaught, Jinwoo calmly withstood the attacks. His high percentage of physical damage reduction and increased stamina made that possible.

Hmm? Hmm? When his attack did nothing, Vulcan angrily pounded harder with its club.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Jinwoo's knees bent but did not buckle.

Still……

It would take more than this for Jinwoo to defeat the big lump. His brow furrowed. Cerberus's Rage skill had been more powerful, but there also had been a time limit, while Vulcan's Rage skill was less effective but had no time constraints. That meant Jinwoo had no idea how long he'd have to stay like this.

Bam! Bam!

Jinwoo gritted his teeth.

My fighting style isn't really to lie back and take the punches anyway……

Bam!

When Vulcan pulled the club back from the shield to wind up for another blow, Jinwoo, who had been readying a counterattack, took this opening to leap toward Vulcan's head. However, he wasn't the only one waiting for a chance.

Hmmmm!

Vulcan leaned back at the same time Jinwoo jumped.

What?

The club was coming at him from the side.

……It tricked me.

There was nothing for his hands could grab or his feet to land on. There was no way to avoid the attack in midair. Even if he blocked it, he had no idea where he'd end up being thrown from the impact.

Hwoooo.

Jinwoo watched the club come closer in slow motion.

Is there anything I can do? Anything?

If he could move his body, he could avoid the impact. At that thought…

Move my body?

An idea popped into his head. There was no time to work out the math. Jinwoo instantly used Ruler's Hand to shove Vulcan.

Hmmmm?

Needless to say, Ruler's Hand didn't have sufficient power to move a creature of Vulcan's size. It was, however, enough to push Jinwoo away.

Fwoooosh.

The tip of the club missed him by a whisker.

Yes!

Jinwoo was sent tumbling to the ground, but it was a relatively safe landing compared to the alternative.

"Phew!" Jinwoo managed to get back on his feet and let out a sigh of relief.

Hmm?

On the other hand, there was no relief on Vulcan's twisted face. It seemed frustrated that its finisher hadn't connected.

Hmm, hmm!

Jinwoo frowned as he watched Vulcan's face turn red.

What do I do now?

Vulcan could easily avoid Jinwoo's frontal assault. Plus, it didn't look like Jinwoo could deal fatal damage if he attacked anything but its head because of the layers of flesh covering its body.

I have to create a situation where it won't be able to evade.

Suddenly, Jinwoo had a good idea. The corners of his mouth rose.

He turned around and bolted. Vulcan assumed Jinwoo was trying to escape and gave chase.

Tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-thump!

Jinwoo paced himself to make sure Vulcan could keep up. His eyes lit up when he found an appropriate building.

That one.

Meanwhile…

Hmm! As Vulcan caught up to Jinwoo, it raised its club.

This bug-like creature! This was its chance to finally kill the annoying pest. A sinister smile crept across Vulcan's face. As it was about to bring down its club…

The bug creature suddenly sped up and scaled the exterior wall of a half-collapsed building.

Hmm? Vulcan knew something wasn't right, but it was unable to slow down in time. *Hmm, hmm?*

The pest climbed up to Vulcan's eye level before it gave the wall a powerful kick.

Crack!

Vulcan was watching the cracks on the wall spread like a spiderweb when something shot toward it at a speed it had never seen anything move at before. It was the pest.

Hmm!

The demon's eyes widened. Jinwoo met its gaze and smirked. With Barca's Dagger, he severed a vein bulging in Vulcan's neck.

Shhhk!

A fountain of blood erupted that could've filled a human body.

Fshhhhh!

Hmm? Hmm! Vulcan dropped its club and tried to stop the bleeding with its hands. *Hmm!*

But that wasn't nearly enough to keep the blood from gushing out. Vulcan started to panic. *H-hmm?*

By now, Jinwoo had already climbed up the creature's back, and he proceeded to stab at its neck with the two daggers in his hands.

One hit's not good enough…

Jinwoo pulled the blades out and used his skill again.

Fatal Strike!

Two daggers burrowed into Vulcan's neck again.

Shhhk!

Shhhk!

Finally, Jinwoo received the message he'd been waiting for.

Ping!

[You have defeated Avaricious Vulcan, Lord of the Lower Floors.]

[You have acquired 150,000 experience points.]

[All demon souls remaining in Vulcan's stomach have been expelled.]

[You have acquired 72 demon souls.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

* * *

BOOM!

Vulcan slumped to the ground. Jinwoo casually emerged from the clouds of dust hanging in the air and surveyed his surroundings. He was going to join his soldiers, but it looked like they were wrapping up as well.

Kreeeeee!

Kik kek!

Kreeee!

Thanks to his soldiers' swordsmanship, the number of Vulcan's minions was dropping rapidly.

Stats.

Jinwoo examined the stats window. His stamina and mana were full, since he'd just leveled up.

I've got plenty of mana, so they don't really need my help.

As long as he had enough mana, the shadow soldiers were practically immortal. That was the power of an army of undead. Jinwoo decided to let his soldiers take care of the last demons while he collected loot.

"Hmm."

It felt like he was opening gifts. The sight of Vulcan's dead body made him smile.

What are we getting this time?

The corpse displayed several pinpoints of light. Jinwoo reached for them and received messages about the items he'd acquired.

Ping!

[You have discovered Item: Demon Monarch's Earrings. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Item: Sphere of Avarice. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered 2 Items: Vulcan's Horns. Would you like to acquire them?]

[You have discovered Material Item: World Tree Fragment. Would you like to acquire it?]

No wonder Jinwoo'd had a good feeling even before engaging Vulcan. As expected, there was a lot of loot. He couldn't contain his happiness as he checked the list.

Vulcan's horns are most likely miscellaneous items.

Based on the name and how many there were, Vulcan's horns were clearly miscellaneous items for earning gold, just like demon's horns.

He focused on the big prizes, and one in particular got his attention.

[You have discovered Material Item: World Tree Fragment. Would you like to acquire it?]

What's a material item?

Could he make something with it, or was it a necessity for a quest? He was curious, since he'd never seen this kind of item before. He

had to acquire something before he could read its description, so he decided to acquire them all.

“Accept all.”

The shining lights transformed into items and materialized at Jinwoo’s feet: a pair of earrings, a red sphere, and a large hunk of wood the size of a grown woman. He could tell immediately which was the World Tree Fragment.

Jinwoo stared at the wood, and its info popped up.

[MATERIAL ITEM: WORLD TREE FRAGMENT]
Acquisition Difficulty: ??

Category: Material

A branch cut from the World Tree with the parts contaminated by Vulcan removed. Wood from the World Tree has strong magic properties and is therefore used for crafting advanced magic tools.

An ingredient for crafting advanced magic tools?

Jinwoo was curious what he could make with it, but unfortunately, that was all the information the description offered. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly an extraordinary find. He could feel an intense energy just being next to it.

I’m not sure what the best use of this would be……

He sent the World Tree Fragment straight to the inventory instead of selling it at the shop. Following that, he looked up the info for the other items one by one.

[ITEM: DEMON MONARCH’S EARRINGS]
Acquisition Difficulty: S

Category: Accessory

Strength +20, Stamina +20

There is a set buff that will be revealed when worn with Demon Monarch's Necklace and Demon Monarch's Ring.

Set Buff 1. (Hidden)

Set Buff 2. (Hidden)

This one has a set buff…

The Demon Monarch's earrings had similar effects to the A-rank Warden's Collar, but they also had additional, hidden set buffs.

They were great even without that, though, as both strength and stamina would increase by twenty points.

I get five ability points per level-up, so…

It was like leveling up eight more times. Jinwoo joyfully grabbed the earrings.

[Would you like to put on Item: Demon Monarch's Earrings?]

Equip.

Like previous items, the earrings disappeared, and the stat boosts were applied. Jinwoo looked contentedly at his increased stats.

A set of Demon Monarch's accessories…

The other accessories should be here somewhere, right?

Based on their names, it was pretty obvious they were to be found within the Demon's Castle. What could the set buffs be? Even with only one part of the set in hand, he was already very excited.

But Jinwoo's smile didn't last long.

What's this……?

[ITEM: SPHERE OF AVARICE]

Acquisition Difficulty: A

Category: Magic tool

Sphere made from the solidified blood of the archdemon Vulcan. Greatly increases magic effects and causes more damage.

Buff: Appetite for Destruction: Doubles damage caused by magic.

The red orb was the size of a billiard ball. Jinwoo took the Sphere of Avarice in his hand. His stats didn't change. He looked at the stats of his job-exclusive skills, but there was no change in the number of shadows he could extract or store.

Maybe I can't use it?

Jinwoo cocked his head.

Doubling magic damage was an amazing buff. Tools to amplify magic were incredibly expensive, so very few mage hunters could afford them. Jinwoo had never heard of a tool that doubled output, though, at any price. If such a thing existed, it would have been all over the news, and he definitely would've heard about it by now. Nevertheless, according to the description, this Sphere of Avarice or whatever could double magic damage.

Either way, if I can't use it, who cares?

Jinwoo felt bitter about it. If this item only doubled magic damage and nothing else, it didn't affect him at all. Extracting and storing shadows had nothing to do with dealing damage, and none of his other skills was magic related. It would've been better if he'd gotten something that boosted his intelligence.

Tsk.

Jinwoo wistfully tossed the Sphere of Avarice into the air and caught it as his shadow soldiers reported back to him after completing their tasks.

Igris was the first to arrive and delivered six demon heads in total to Jinwoo, holding three in each hand.

"……" Jinwoo scratched his head in frustration as he looked at the kneeling Igris. "Can you knock that off?"

Of course, Igris did not reply, keeping his head bowed in deference.

"Because when you do that…"

Jinwoo looked over at Iron, who had severed Vulcan's head and was now dragging it back to offer to Jinwoo.

"Look! He copies you."

Moreover, Jinwoo had been the one who'd killed Vulcan. The hunter sighed deeply as he gazed at Iron, when suddenly, an interesting idea popped into his head.

Can my men use the Sphere of Avarice the way I was able to use Iron's shield earlier?

Just then, Jinwoo caught sight of the mage soldiers, who moved slower than both the knights and infantry soldiers, trailing behind the infantry. Jinwoo called over the first among the three mages to arrive. When he gestured to them, the one that had worn his black robes inside out tried in vain to hurry over.

……It'll be faster if I go there.

Jinwoo shook his head and strode toward the mage, then handed the sphere to him. He then pointed at the building he'd climbed earlier. Since he could control the shadow soldiers at will, he didn't have to explain anything to them.

He signaled. "Fire."

Suddenly, fireballs twice their usual size appeared in the raised hand of the mage.

Whoa!

Jinwoo couldn't believe his eyes. He'd barely had time to react when the fireball flew from the mage's palm.

Fwoosh…

Kabooooom!

"Whoa!" Jinwoo's jaw hit the ground.

The fireball incinerated the building as if it were made of paper. Even with the building destroyed, the flames raged.

Crackle, crackle!

Jinwoo continued admiring the blaze as he quickly reclaimed the Sphere of Avarice from his minion. He then carefully reread its description.

Nothing. There's definitely nothing about it.

He read it again and again several times, but there was nothing saying he couldn't transfer the sphere to someone else. Could he possibly sell it to another person?

Gulp.

Jinwoo swallowed. His eyes turned to the burning building again.

Fwoooosh!

Another part of the structure collapsed with a loud noise. Jinwoo couldn't stop smiling as he watched.

Oh wow……

Mage hunters would go crazy for this, wouldn't they? The disappointment that had been in his eyes earlier was now replaced by anticipation.

* * *

It was a sunny afternoon…

“The young man from 902?” a middle-aged woman repeated. “Well, I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you, then.” Kichul bowed to her.

He had been waiting for Hunter Sung near his apartment building for three days now. Not once had he seen Jinwoo. He’d brought his homemade vegetable juice each day in vain.

Kichul sighed deeply and pulled out his phone.

Riiing, riiing.

The person on the other side picked up shortly.

“Ah, Kichul.”

“Manager An.”

It was Sangmin.

“No sign of Hunter Jinwoo Sung, sir. His neighbors say they haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s nothing we can do, then. Just come straight to the office starting tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

Click.

Sangmin hung up the phone and gave it some thought. Where had Jinwoo gone? Sangmin hadn’t been able to contact him at all in the past few days. He’d sent Kichul to check on his apartment in case the

hunter was avoiding his phone calls, but he hadn't been seen near his home, either.

Suddenly, Sangmin worried that something might have happened to him.

Although, do I even need to worry about him?

In any case, he felt ill at ease.

Tap, tap.

Someone had tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see Heejin standing there.

"Seems like he told his sister he was going on a trip with a friend for a week."

"Are you talking about Hunter Sung?"

"Yes."

"Then……that means he's not on the face of the earth."

"Pardon?" Heejin's eyes widened.

Sangmin quickly explained. "Naturally, there are no records of him leaving the country, and there hasn't been any activity on his bank account or credit card for several days."

"You can check that stuff?"

"It's my job to monitor hunters, after all."

"Oh wow."

"Also, according to the association, they last tracked his cell signal somewhere in the middle of the city. That was five days ago. Mysterious, isn't it?"

"He hasn't been kidnapped, has he?" The question slipped from Heejin's mouth.

They looked at each other, then started laughing. Jinwoo, kidnapped? He was the hunter who had cleared a high-rank dungeon all by himself—and a red gate, no less.

Sangmin scratched his cheek and responded. “It’d have to at least be the hunter-exclusive Chinese Special Forces to bring in Jinwoo.”

Heejin nodded in agreement.

Sangmin had a question for her. “By the way, how did you know he went on a trip?”

“Oh, from Songyi. We’re still in touch. She goes to the same school as Jinwoo’s sister, so I asked Songyi to check with her.”

“I see……”

With that, their conversation stalled as both of them wondered the same thing.

Just where the heck is he?

* * *

The upper floors are a whole different game.

Jinwoo recalled Avaricious Vulcan, the only boss monster he’d met in the Demon’s Castle thus far. Its title had been Lord of the Lower Floors. After the fiftieth floor, where it had been stationed, the level of difficulty drastically increased.

Previously, he’d clear at least ten floors, sometimes closer to twenty, in a day. But that had slowed to the point where he found it challenging to clear even seven or eight a day.

He now stood on the seventy-fourth floor.

High-rank demons were common on these floors, and he also occasionally ran into top-rank demons, whose size alone set them worlds apart from those found on the lower floors.

Shunk!

A top-rank demon the size of a two-story building slowly fell to the ground with a dagger sticking out of its chest.

Thud!

[You have defeated a top-rank demon.]

[You have acquired 1,700 experience points.]

[You have acquired 1 demon soul.]

Jinwoo pulled Barca's Dagger out of the dead demon's chest. That was the last one for this floor. Yet another battle was over.

The victorious shadow soldiers began gathering around Jinwoo. He inspected his troops. Somehow, they appeared exhausted, even though that wasn't possible for an undead army. But the monsters on these upper floors were powerful. At least this last battle had been easier because no archdemons had appeared.

Each one of those is basically a boss.

And this wasn't just a theory with no evidence. He'd acquired the Sphere of Avarice after defeating Vulcan, and its description said that the sphere was made from the solidified blood of the archdemon Vulcan. If "archdemon" indicated Vulcan's rank, then those on the upper floors were no different.

Archdemons appeared more frequently after the seventieth floor.

The increasingly powerful monsters are one thing, but……

There was a bigger problem. The environment had completely shifted as Jinwoo ascended. All the cities were on fire after the fifty-first floor. The higher he climbed, the more intense the fires became.

Starting from the seventieth floor, it had gotten so hot that his health was drained just standing there. His fatigue increased with the slightest movement.

He'd been right on the nose to call the Demon's Castle a "flaming fortress."

……I need to go down.

That was enough for this raid. He needed to find a countermeasure for the fires.

I need an artifact that works against fire magic.

Equipment used by high-rank hunters was incredibly expensive, and it went without saying that that included items with defensive magic. He'd once seen an item on the news that cost tens of billions of won.

He'd made a lot of money working with Jinho, but he was still worried whether he could afford the artifact he required. That was why he needed insurance.

Selling this should cover it.

Jinwoo smiled at the Sphere of Avarice safely stored in his inventory. It was an item every mage hunter would lust after. How much would the sphere fetch in an auction? If he could demonstrate its quality, high-rank mage hunters would line up for it.

He closed the inventory. His goal for this raid had been to level up, which he'd done successfully. Therefore, he wasn't disappointed having to postpone clearing the dungeon.

But one thing did bother him. Jinwoo looked up higher.

[Demon souls collected: 9,624/10,000]

Just under four hundred to go…

If he could just collect a few more demon souls, his quest would be over. Today was day six. One day would be more than enough time to complete the quest. The only good thing about the upper floors was that he could get multiple souls from killing one demon. He could collect four hundred more in no time.

Let's just finish this and get out of here.

Jinwoo came to a decision and turned around. There was a spring in his step because he had a clear goal.

[Floors one through seventy-four have been opened.]

[Where would you like to teleport?]

Jinwoo stood in the middle of the magic elevator or, rather, the teleportation circle and said, "Floor seventy-five."

* * *

How lucky was this? Jinwoo grinned from ear to ear while observing the monster guarding the teleportation circle in the distance.

[Metus, Guide of Souls]

The name alone made it clear this was a boss monster.

Its black robes and silver necklace made it stand out from the others.

I bet that's the Demon Monarch's necklace.

Jinwoo had been aiming only to complete the quest, but now he was going to get to collect another item for that set.

But that wasn't what brought a smile to his face. Good items or not, it was useless if he couldn't kill the monster.

Jinwoo held a dagger in each hand and charged forward.

The skeleton mage in the black robe spotted Jinwoo running toward it.

Ping!

[Metus, Guide of Souls has discovered an intruder!]

As expected of a boss monster, the creature cast a spell instantly. A red magic circle appeared beneath its feet as ominous dark energy swirled around it.

[Metus, Guide of Souls, has used Skill: Cursed Voice.]

An undead army rose to answer Metus's call, and they numbered in the thousands. An average person would have been horrified by this, but Jinwoo was not in the least bit fazed, even as he was surrounded.

I knew it……

He'd expected this to happen. With all the black smoke filling the area, it wasn't difficult to guess what kind of monster Metus was.

Guide of Souls.

The name had confirmed it. And as Jinwoo had predicted, Metus had summoned a powerful undead army. Luckily, Jinwoo had the best job in this field.

"Arise!"

Ahhhhhhh!

Soldiers emerged from the shadows of the undead, screaming in agony. They numbered several hundred. Their ranks paled in comparison to Metus's army, but they were more than sufficient because he had the real deal.

"Make way!"

Ebony soldiers materialized from Jinwoo's shadow. They were the true army. While the several hundred soldiers Jinwoo had extracted

from the shadows bought time, the army he commanded quickly cleared a path for him that led to a single destination.

Igris and Iron led the way, crushing the undead at an impressive pace. The distance to Metus shrank in an instant.

This is close enough.

Jinwoo bolted ahead.

Dash!

[Skill: Dash has leveled up!]

Because he'd run around a lot inside the Demon's Castle, Dash went up another level.

Nice.

Jinwoo grinned. Having escaped the encroaching undead army, Jinwoo came face-to-face with Metus in a flash.

Jinwoo looked the creature dead in the eye.

Not what you'd expected, eh?

Jinwoo looked relaxed, like he'd already won, and this made Metus flinch. No, it only appeared to flinch.

Do monsters feel fear?

No time to think about that. Jinwoo's dagger was a blur.

Whump.

The boss-rank monster dropped lifelessly to the ground.

He knew from experience that mage-type monsters were weak and relied on controlling others to fight for them.

The moment he'd laid eyes on Metus, Jinwoo had pictured this outcome.

Jinwoo sent his daggers back to inventory.

Soon, a message came up.

Ping!

[You have defeated Metus, Guide of Souls.]

[You have acquired 200,000 experience points.]

[You have discovered the demon souls stored in Metus's pendant.]

[You have acquired 220 demon souls.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo pumped his fists. Two hundred and twenty souls at once. He hadn't expected that.

[Demon souls collected: 9,971/10,000]

A smile played on his lips.

Almost there.

He had less than thirty to go. He could do it by merely killing a few demons. Jinwoo really wanted to get the quest over with, so he quickly grabbed all the drops and entered the teleportation circle.

[Where would you like to teleport?]

"Floor seventy-six."

* * *

On the East Coast of the United States, Dongsoo's body twitched as if he was having a nightmare before he suddenly bolted upright.

……?

The white ceiling was the first thing he saw. He looked around at the unfamiliar environment.

“The……hospital?”

It… It wasn’t a dream?

Wiping the sweat trickling under his chin, he discovered that he was in a hospital gown with his arm connected to an IV.

Dongsoo was pissed. He spoke icily. “If you have something to say, say it and get out of here.”

The assistant director of the Hunter Command Center was in the room with him. The middle-aged white man who had more gray hair than black slowly approached Dongsoo.

“I was waiting for you because there was something I needed to personally ask you.”

What did he want with Dongsoo? The hunter raised his head.

The assistant director looked him directly in the eye. “That man Ilhwan Sung…… Are you certain he’s a magic beast?”

“Are you saying I attacked another human being?”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you. I just want to verify what I saw with my own eyes.”

He handed his cell phone to Dongsoo. A video was playing on the screen.

“Is this……?”

“Footage from a surveillance camera nearby.”

In the video, an Asian man was rescuing employees from the collapsing Command Center building. There was no need to ask who that man was. How could Dongsoo forget? It had been the last face he’d seen before he lost consciousness.

The man was Ilhwan Sung.

The assistant director had a dark expression. “I’ve…never heard of a magic beast that helps humans. You haven’t changed your mind about this man?”

“……He’s definitely a magic beast.”

“I see.” The assistant director took back his phone. “Once you’re discharged from here, please stop by the Command Center. There’s some paperwork you need to fill out.”

He began to walk away but stopped when Dongsoo asked a question.

“What happened to that man?”

“He vanished right after he fought you. We tried chasing after him, but I don’t know if we can capture someone powerful enough to defeat you……”

Before he left, the assistant director asked in a forced tone, “Any chance you know where he might have gone?”

“……”

Dongsoo’s silence made it clear he wouldn’t talk, so the assistant director took his leave.

As soon as he was gone, Dongsoo yanked out his IV. “Dammit!”

He was embarrassed about losing the fight. Ilhwan had his foot on Dongsoo’s neck even before he’d realized what had happened. Dongsoo’d pathetically cowered on the ground. As he gasped for air, Ilhwan had given him a warning.

“Don’t ever set foot in Korea. I say this not for my son’s sake but for your own. You won’t be able to close your eyes even when you’re dead.”

Dongsoo couldn't remember anything after that. When he'd come to, he was in the hospital.

I won't be able to close my eyes even when I'm dead?

What did that mean? Was he threatening Dongsoo with a slow and painful death?

How dare he threaten me……?!

Dongsoo's fist trembled. Not only had he lost to a magic beast, but he'd been humiliated by it.

I know where that prick went.

Dongsoo vowed to capture him. But how? Magic beast or not, he couldn't deny that the bastard was strong.

I'll need better gear to catch him.

Luckily, he could easily get his hands on some.

I need to contact my guild.

Dongsoo was a member of the Scavengers, one of the top guilds in the world. There was even a joke about the Scavenger Guild's artifacts being worth more than the annual budget of a small country.

I'll be fine as long as I have an artifact.

Dongsoo's gaze was furious.

South Korea. That would be his destination.

* * *

[You have defeated an archdemon.]

[You have acquired 2,200 experience points.]

[You have acquired 1 demon soul.]

[You have acquired 3 slave demon souls.]

It's over!

Jinwoo couldn't hide his delight. Luckily, he'd acquired four souls from the last monster he'd killed and was able to surpass the quest goal.

[Demon souls collected: 10,001/10,000]

Ping!

[You have completed Quest: Collect Demon Souls (1).]

[The rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

Of course.

At his response, the list popped up.

Ping!

[YOU HAVE THE FOLLOWING REWARDS.]

Rewards:

Reward 1. Your choice of any 1 item

Reward 2. All stats +20

Reward 3. Mystery Reward

[Would you like to accept all?]

The other rewards caught his eye, but Jinwoo was most interested in the first one for now. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he'd completed the quest mainly for that.

Accept reward one.

Ping!

[You can choose one item out of all available options.]

[Which item would you like?]

Any item he wanted. Of course, he'd had one specific prize in mind since the moment he'd seen the quest.

Had he chosen differently, would the outcome have been different? He'd been curious about it since that day. He wasn't sure if it counted an item, but he had nothing to lose by asking.

[You can choose one item out of all available options.]

[Which item would you like?]

The system asked again, as if rushing him.

After much deliberation, Jinwoo gave his answer.

"A cursed mystery box."

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